Delmore Schwartz

THE LITERARY DICTATORSHIP OF T. S. ELIOT*

When we think of the character of literary dictators in the past, it is easy to see that since 1922, at least, Eliot has occupied a position in the English-speaking world analogous to that occupied by Ben Jonson, Dryden, Pope, Samuel Johnson, Coleridge, and Matthew Arnold. It is noticeable that each of these dictators has been a critic as well as a poet, and we may infer from this the fact that it is necessary for them to practice both poetry and criticism.

Another characteristic is that each of these literary dictators has in some way reversed the judgments of his immediate predecessor. For example, Arnold denied that Pope and Dryden were really poets, declaring that they were merely "wit-writers." Eliot in the same way declared that Pope and Dryden were truly poets and that Keats and Shelley, two of Arnold's favorites, were really insufficient and inadequate as poets.

One can hardly use such a term as dictatorship without suggesting unfortunate political associations. A literary dictatorship, however, is quite unlike a political one because you cannot force people to like poets or poetry, although you can persuade them. The remarkable thing about most of the literary dictators I have mentioned is that they succeeded in persuading at least one generation of readers to accept their literary taste.

When we come to Eliot's reign, we find that something has really been added: we have virtually two dictatorships from one literary dictator. Between 1922 and 1933 Eliot, in a series of unpre-

* *This is a shortened version of a lecture given at the English Graduate Union of Columbia University on April 6, 1947. At the time, I did not know that Eliot had already delivered his lecture on Milton in England. A different version of this essay will appear in a book on T. S. Eliot which New Directions will publish next spring.—D.S.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cedented essays which were initially disguised as book reviews, revaluated the history of English poetry in one set of terms; between 1933 and 1946 he gradually reversed his whole evaluation, so that, for example, Tennyson, whom he scorned in 1922, was the object of serious and elevated commendation in 1936. In the same way Yeats, who in 1922 was said to be outside of the tradition of English poetry merely because he was Irish, is praised in the highest terms in 1933 as someone who "by a great triumph of development began to write and is still writing some of the most beautiful poetry in the language, some of the clearest, simplest, most direct." Some of the poems that Eliot refers to were written long before 1922. Thus it is almost possible to say of Eliot, "The dictator has abdicated. Long live the dictator!" This is the only instance I know where anyone has abdicated and immediately succeeded to his own throne.

We can take 1922 as the approximate beginning of the first period, for in that year Eliot began to edit *The Criterion,* and "The Waste Land" was published in the first number, although it was in 1921 that Eliot published the reviews in the *London Times Literary Supplement* which were later collected as *Three Essays in Homage to John Dryden.* In the most famous of these essays, "Metaphysical Poets," Eliot declared that English poetry had not been the same since the death of John Donne. Dryden was a good poet, and Milton was a good poet, but their very virtues brought about a dissociation of sensibility in their successors. Since the time of Donne, according to this essay, there have been no poets in English who really enjoyed a unity of sensibility. What Eliot means by "unity of sensibility," a dubious psychological phrase, is difficult to make clear, but can perhaps best be stated by paraphrasing Eliot's remark that Donne felt his thoughts at the tips of his senses. All poets since Donne, with a few exceptional moments of unity, have permitted their thoughts and their emotions to be separated. "In the seventeenth centry," says Eliot, "a dissociation of sensibility set in from which we have never recovered; this dissociation was not natural and was aggravated by the two most powerful poets of the century, Milton and Dryden. . . . The sentimental age began early in the eighteenth century and continued. Poets revolted against the ratiocinative; they thought and felt by fits unbalanced. . . . In one or two passages of Shelley's 'Triumph of Life' and Keat's second 'Hyperion' there are traces of struggle

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

toward unification of sensibility. But Keats and Shelley died, and Tennyson and Browning ruminated." The poets prior to Dryden and Milton, however, "are more mature . . . . and were better than later poets of certainly not less literary ability."

By 1934 Eliot had fruitfully contradicted, modified or qualified practically all the literary and critical judgments implicit in this essay. He had praised not only Tennyson and Yeats, but also Wordsworth and Coleridge, who were more or less beyond the pale of charity in 1921. In 1937, when questioned during a radio interview on the British Broadcasting Company about what he regarded as great poetry, he replied that Wordsworth's "Independence and Resolution" and Coleridge's "Ode on Dejection" were probably "touchstones of greatness." This is a far cry from what Eliot said in 1922 and what has been echoed a countless number of times by critics who have been influenced by Eliot.

And yet I do not mean to imply in the least that Eliot is merely contradictory. It is true that no one could have guessed, by reading his essay on the "Metaphysical Poets" in 1922, that by 1937 he would admire Wordsworth and Coleridge very much and cite them, rather than Donne, as "touchstones of greatness." Nor could anyone have guessed or suspected that he would praise Byron and Kipling, among other unlikely possibilities. But on the other hand, there is a real unity in back of all of these seemingly contradictory judgments. One basis of this unity is the admiration for Dante which obviously began when Eliot was still an undergraduate. If we understand Eliot's gradual and profound re-reading of Dante, then we can see how at one point, fascinated by one aspect of Dante, he would be likely to salute Donne, while at a later stage it would be natural for him to admire the characteristic directness and clarity of the poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge which he cited as touchstones of what is great in poetry. If we examine these poems carefully, we can see that in the most direct way they resemble the very beginning of *The Divine Comedy.*

And here, too, we can find at least one explanation of the distaste Eliot has expressed at various times for the poetry of Milton. It was in 1933 here at Columbia that Eliot, by using what we may call the method of invidious comparison, compared Milton to Dante, although the two poets are not really comparable. Since Milton was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a dedicated, self-conscious literary artist who decided to write an epic poem which would be like other epic poems and which would be a national epic, it seems clear to me that the true comparison would be to Virgil. How, then, are we to explain Eliot's dispraise of Milton?

We have as possibilities all sorts of unconvincing explanations: for example, it is said that Eliot depreciates Milton because Milton was anti-authoritarian in religious matters, while Eliot himself is nothing if not authoritarian,—an explanation which might be based upon Eliot's remark that "Milton's celestial and infernal regions are large but insufficiently furnished apartments, filled by heavy conversation; and one remarks about the Puritan mythology its thinness." But this is clearly not a sufficient explanation, since we know that Ezra Pound expressed an equal dislike of Milton, and no one can suppose that Ezra Pound's literary opinions were influenced by Anglo-Catholicism.

Another possible explanation is that Milton is not the kind of poet that Eliot himself desired to be, and there is, as everyone knows, a natural tendency upon the part of a poet who writes criticism to try to justify and praise in his criticism what he attempts to accomplish in his poetry. Thus Eliot criticizes Milton and reduces his importance by saying that "the very greatest poets set you before real men talking, carry you on in real events, moving." In the same essay in which Eliot makes this remark he says, "There is a large class of persons, including some who appear in print as critics, who regard any censure upon a great poet as a breach of the peace, as an act of wanton iconoclasm, or even hoodlumism. The kind of derogatory criticism that I have to make upon Milton is not intended for such persons, who cannot understand that it is more important, in some vital respects, to be a good poet than to be a great poet." This sounds to me as if Mr. Eliot were protesting far too much.

Milton is a crucial instance, because Milton is the one poet for whom Eliot expresses a distaste in both his revaluations of English poetry. Let us take the sentence I have just quoted. In the same essay Eliot says, "It must be admitted that Milton is a very 'great' poet indeed." We have then to determine, if we can, the difference between being a "very great poet" and being "one of the very greatest," and since Eliot puts the term "great" in quotation marks as if it were a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dubious one, it would not be strange if a man from Mars decided that some infinitesimal hair-splitting were involved, or that Eliot, like Milton, had found darkness visible, for surely there is a kind of darkness in distinguishing between "very great" and "the very greatest."

There are other possible explanations of Eliot's attitude to Milton, but they are all merely guesses which are easily punctured. Whatever the explanation may be, I should like to rush in where scientists fear to tread and, with complete foolhardiness, venture to predict that when Eliot next speaks of Milton, next month, he will praise him with more sympathy and justice than he ever has before. I should say that I have the advantage of knowing that Eliot has expressed a desire to lecture on Milton when he comes to America this spring. In saying this, I do not depend wholly upon a wish to indulge in predictions like a weather forecaster. There is real evidence in Eliot's recent poetry and criticism to suggest such a revision of judgment.

In "Four Quartets" there is not only a paraphrase of a famous passage in "Samson Agonistes"—

O dark, dark, dark. They all go into the dark.

but in addition, there are many indications that Eliot as a poet has found himself in an emotional situation which resembles Milton's when he was writing "Paradise Lost," especially in the personal and autobiographical passages. The same kind of resemblances can be found between certain parts of "Samson Agonistes" and certain passages in the "Four Quartets." For example, the justly famous passage in "Samson Agonistes,"

All is best, though we oft doubt
What the unsearchable dispose
Of highest Wisdom brings about,
And ever best found in the close.

This seems to me to be very close in feeling and attitude to one of the finest passages in the "Four Quartets":

Sin is Behovely, but
All shall be well, and
All manner of thing shall be well
By the purification of motive
In the ground of our beseeching.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And there are also other indications too detailed for my present purpose. However, the last quotation, and especially the line, "The purification of the motive," suggest a consideration of what standards were involved in Eliot's initial evaluation of the history of English poetry and his subsequent revaluation.

They can be named in a summary and incomplete way as follows: first, actuality; second, honesty (closely connected with actuality and with the "purification of motive" of which I have just spoken); third, the purification and maintenance of the English language; fourth, the dramatic sense, which I shall try to define in a moment; fifth, the quality of the versification.

Needless to say, this list is not by any means exhaustive and obviously each of these sought-for qualities overlaps and interconnects with the others. For example, the sense of the actual is necessary to a poet's being dramatic; a sensitivity to the manifold possibilities of versification cannot really be separated from a desire to purify, maintain and sustain the English language.

Let me now try briefly to define and illustrate each of these qualities as they manifest themselves in Eliot's criticism of English poetry. First, the sense of the actual, which is perhaps the most difficult of all to define, since whenever we attempt to define anything, we must do so by referring to the actual and perhaps by merely pointing to it.

An illustration, not from Eliot himself, but from James Joyce, who in so many ways is profoundly close to Eliot as an author, may be useful. A would-be novelist came to Joyce with a manuscript of a novel she had just finished, telling Joyce that she would like his opinion of the novel and saying that only one other person had read the book, the porter of the hotel in which she was living. "What did the porter say?" Joyce inquired. "He objected to only one episode," replied the female novelist. "The episode in which the lover finds the locket of his beloved while walking in the woods, picks it up, and kisses it passionately." "What was the porter's objection?" said Joyce. "He said," she replied, "that before kissing the locket passionately, the lover should have rubbed it against his coat to get the dirt off it." "Go back," said Joyce, "to that porter. There is nothing I can tell you that he does not already know." This too is not as complete a pointing to the actual as one might wish, since the actual might be

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

misunderstood to mean only that which is sordid, only that which the muckraker concerns himself with, while Eliot has in mind the actuality of human emotion and human nobility as well.

Moreover, Eliot makes it clear that a sense of the actual is really incomplete and warped without a sense of the past, that sense of the past which, he says, is indispensable to "anyone who wants to continue to be a poet after his 25th year." But we must be careful not to misunderstand Eliot's concern with a sense of the past as mere nostalgia for the days when knighthood was in flower. It is the past as actual, as an actual part of the present, which concerns Eliot. And one must have a strong sense of actuality in order to know just what of the past is alive in the present and what is merely a monument or a souvenir. Without a sense of the past, one's sense of the actual is likely to be confused with an obsessive pursuit of what is degraded, or idiosyncratic, or transitory, or brand-new. This is the dead-end of the naturalistic novelist who supposes that the slum is somehow more real than the library. Conversely, a sense of the actual enables one to understand the past itself as something which was not by any means Arcadian. Perhaps one can go so far as to say that one cannot have much of a sense of the past without a sense of the actual or much of a sense of the actual without a sense of the past. Thus, to use an example which can stand for much that is characteristic of Eliot, if one looks at a church, one does not really see very much of what one is looking at if one does not have both a sense of the actual, a sense of the past, and a sense of the past *as* actual in the present.

II

Let me turn now to a few instances of how Eliot uses the criterion of actuality in his criticism. Blake is praised because one of his poems expresses "the naked observation" and another "the naked insight":

> *But most through midnight streets I hear*
> *How the youthful harlot's curse*
> *Blasts the newborn infant's ear*
> *And blights with plagues the marriage hearse.*

In the same essay, which was written in 1920, Blake is praised because he possesses the peculiar honesty, which according to Eliot, is peculiar

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to all great poetry, an honesty which is to be found, Eliot says, in Homer, Aeschylus, and Dante, and an honesty which is, he adds, in a world too frightened to be honest, curiously terrifying, an honesty against which the whole world conspires because it is unpleasant. Here we can see how closely connected in Eliot's mind are the sense of the actual and the ability of a poet to be honest.

Now let us take a negative instance, that of Swinburne. Swinburne for Eliot is a poet whose real virtue was his verbalism, his use of words for their own sake. "In the verse of Swinburne the object (or we might say the actual) has ceased to exist. . . . " Swinburne, says Eliot, dwelt exclusively and consistently among words divorced from any reference to objects and actualities, and this kind of poetry is compared not only with that of Campion, which has both a beauty of language and a reference to actuality, but also to "the language which is more important to us . . . . the language which is struggling to digest new objects . . . new feelings, new aspects, as for instance the prose of James Joyce and Joseph Conrad."

There is another important negative instance. Eliot speaks of the images in the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher as "cut and slightly withered flowers stuck in the sand" in comparison with the images of Shakespeare, Donne, Webster, and Middleton, which have, he says, "tentacular roots" which reach down to "the deepest terrors and desires." In the same way, Tennyson is praised for his great technical skill but the quotations which Eliot cites, in 1936, when he reverses his judgment of Tennyson are praised because they are descriptions of a particular time and place. This could only be, Eliot says, an English street.*

Now, to return for a moment to my general subject, we can see here the underlying unity which is involved in Eliot's revision of his first evaluation of English poetry. For in praising Blake as one who was unpleasantly honest and full of naked observations and insights, Eliot said that such honesty could not exist apart from great technical skill. In his first revaluation Eliot had praised Tennyson for his technical skill but dismissed him as one who merely ruminated. When

* The lines are:

He is not there; but far away
The noise of life begins again,
And ghastly through the drizzling rain
On the bald street breaks the blank day.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Eliot came to revise his judgment of Tennyson in 1936, his revision was consequent upon a study of Tennyson's versification, which led him to see how that poet's great technical skill did in fact, at times, enable him to render the actual and not merely ruminate upon it. Thus, in a sense, Eliot is consistent throughout; the reason that a revision has been necessary is that Eliot was burdened by preconceptions which belonged to the period in which he was writing, and he had simply not read sufficiently in some of the poets he dismissed.

So too with the poetry of Milton, although I do not think that here it is a question of insufficient reading. When Eliot says in depreciation of some of Milton's poems that they are conventional, artificial, and enamelled, he is complaining again about the absence of the actual, as we see further in the same essay from which I have already quoted: "That the greatest poets set you before real men talking, carry you on in real events, moving." It seems to me likely enough that by now Eliot has perceived beneath the perhaps artificial and certainly grandiloquent surface of Milton's language precisely that peculiar honesty about the essential strength or sickness of the human soul, which he found in Dante, Shakespeare, Blake, and other of the very greatest poets. I should think that this desirable revision of opinion may also have come about as a result of the development of Eliot's own writing during recent years. When Eliot spoke of Milton here at Columbia in 1933, he said that "Samson Agonistes" is not really a dramatic poem but rather an extended lyric. In the "Four Quartets," as I have already suggested, there are many indications that the kind of experience Milton deals with in "Samson Agonistes"—Samson, shorn, blind and chained to the wheel, and Milton himself blind and chained to old age—will be more understandable to the poet and critic who writes:

> *The poetry does not matter.*
> *It was not to start again what one had expected,*
> *What was to be the value of the long looked forward to,*
> *Long hoped for calm, the autumnal serenity*
> *And the wisdom of age?*

And who writes later in the same group of poems:

> *Since our concern was speech, and speech impelled us*
> *To purify the dialect of the tribe*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And urge the mind to aftersight and foresight,
Let me disclose the gifts reserved for age
To set a crown upon your lifetime's effort.
First, the cold friction of expiring sense
Without enchantment, offering no promise,
But bitter tastelessness of shadow fruit
As body and soul begin to fall asunder.
Second, the conscious impotence of rage
At human folly, and the laceration
Of laughter at what ceases to amuse.
And last, the rending pain of re-enactment
Of all that you have done and been; the shame
Of motives late revealed, and the awareness
Of things ill done and done to others' harm
Which once we took for exercise of virtue.
Then fools' approval stings and honor stains.

It seems to me that the poet who wrote these lines cannot fail to recognize at last both the spiritual grandeur of "Samson Agonistes" and also the concern with speech, the effort to purify the dialect of the tribe, and urge the mind to aftersight and foresight, which is characteristic of that great poem.

In thus supposing that Eliot's experience of the last decade will lead him to a new recognition and admiration of Milton, it seems to me that I am illustrating another aspect of the sense of the actual. It is actuality itself, the actuality of middle age approaching old age, which leads to a deeper understanding of Milton's major poetry, most of which, after all, was written in middle or old age.

III

Let us return now to the other touchstones, or criteria, of poetic genuineness.

Honesty is perhaps a shorthand term for a willingness to face the reality of one's emotions. Thomas Middleton is given what seems to me virtually fabulous praise by being said to have created in "The Changeling," "an eternal tragedy, as permanent as Oedipus or Anthony and Cleopatra . . . the tragedy of the unmoral nature suddenly trapped in the inexorable toils of morality. . . . A play which has a pro-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

found and permanent moral value and horror." Thus we can see how a poet's honesty is, in fact, very often a concern with morality, with the actuality of morality. Yet this moralism must be distinguished carefully from that overt didacticism which has spoiled the work of many great artists such as Tolstoy and resulted in the censorship of more than one masterpiece. Notice I have said the actuality of morality rather than simply morality as such. A further elucidation is to be found in Eliot's discussion of Hamlet, a character who suffered, says Eliot, from "the intense feeling, ecstatic or terrible, without an object or exceeding its object, which every person of sensibility has known. . . . The ordinary person puts such feelings to sleep, or trims down his feelings to fit the business world. The artist keeps them alive. . . . " In *Hamlet* Shakespeare "tackled a problem that proved too much for him. Why he attempted it at all, is an insoluble puzzle; under the compulsion of what experience he attempted to express the inexpressibly horrible, we cannot ever know." To conclude that *Hamlet* is a failure, as Eliot does, though it is the most read, performed, and studied of all plays, seems to me to have a curious notion of success. To inquire as to why he wrote the play at all is incomprehensible in view of the remarks Eliot makes about the artist's effort to deal with emotions which are ecstatic, terrible, and inexpressibly horrifying. But I am not concerned so much with the wrongness of Eliot's judgment in an essay written as early as 1919 as I am concerned with the relation of these remarks to the honesty of the poet and the actuality of moral existence, to which these remarks point. The poet's honesty, and thus his morality, consists in his ability to face the ecstasy and the terror of his emotions, his desires, his fears, his aspirations, and his failure to realize his and other human beings' moral allegiances. Thus the morality of the poet consists not in teaching other human beings how to behave, but in facing the deepest emotional and moral realities in his poems, and in this way making it possible for his readers to confront the total reality of their existence, physical, emotional, moral and religious.

As Eliot says in one of his poems, "Mankind cannot bear very much reality," and Eliot looks always for those qualities in a poem which are likely to help the reader to see reality, if not to bear it.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

IV

Eliot's theory of the nature and history of English poetry as stated in this essay of 1921 can be summarized as follows: "The metaphysical poets possessed a mind and sensibility which could devour *any* kind of experience." (Here, in passing, we may question whether any poet can devour any or all kinds of experience, and further whether such a poet as Wordsworth was not capable of taking hold of certain kinds of experience which the metaphysical poets know little or nothing about.)

Eliot continues by saying that Milton and Dryden were so powerful—"performed certain poetic functions so magnificently that the magnitude of the effect conceals the absence of others." The language of poetry improved from that time forward, says Eliot, but "the feeling became more crude." In the metaphysical poets and their predecessors, "there is a direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling," and there is also a kind of intellectual wit, as Eliot observes in his companion essay on Andrew Marvell. But in Collins, Gray, Wordsworth, Shelley, Tennyson, Browning, Hardy, Yeats, and practically every poet since the time of Donne, there is missing that capacity of the mind, that wholeness of sensibility which makes it possible to say of Donne that "a thought was to him an experience," while Tennyson and Browning "merely ruminated"—"they are poets and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odor of a rose." When Eliot adds Hardy to this list because he was a modern Englishman and Yeats because he was Irish, it seems to me that we may justifiably say that seldom have so many poets been depreciated or dismissed in so few pages. Yet, extreme and sectarian as this view is, it depends nonetheless upon a profound sense of the nature of poetry. We can see what this sense comes to when Eliot says that "those critics who tell poets to look into their hearts and write do not tell them to look deep enough. . . . Racine and Donne looked into a great deal more than the heart. One must look into the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

V

The third of the standards with which Eliot has criticized poetry is language as such. This is connected, as we would expect, with the remarks I have just quoted, for Eliot says, that "in French poetry, for example, the two greatest masters of diction are also the two greatest psychologists, the most curious explorers of the soul." In English poetry, however, Eliot finds that two of the greatest masters of diction are Milton and Dryden and they triumph, he says, "by a dazzling disregard of the human soul." Here again there is an underlying consistency in the operation of Eliot's mind, for what he is saying of Dryden and Milton is close to what he had said in 1920 of Swinburne as being purely verbal, of using language really divorced from any reference to objects. And it should be noted that only by a very strong sense of the actual can we distinguish between poetry which explores the human soul and poetry which is largely verbal. There is an intermediate mode: poetry whose chief aim is that of incantation, of inducing a certain state of emotion. The two instances Eliot cites are Poe and Mallarmé in an essay written in French in 1926 and never translated into English.

The essence of Eliot's concern with language in itself is perhaps best formulated in the following quotation: "The poetry of a people takes its life from the people's speech and in turn gives life to it; it represents its highest point of consciousness, its greatest power, and its most delicate sensibility." If we take this concern with language in isolation it might seem that the chief purpose of poetry was to maintain and purify the language, and indeed Eliot's praise of Dryden often seems to be bestowed on that poet merely because he effected a reformation in the use of language, rather than for his intrinsic qualities. Throughout Eliot's own poetry there are references to the difficulties and trials of anyone who attempts to use language carefully. In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the protagonist resents the fact that he is formulated in a phrase; in "Sweeney Agonistes" one character says "I gotta use words when I talk to you," and it should be noted that the use of slang in this play witnesses an extraordinary sensitivity to colloquial language upon the part of one who in colloquial terms is known as a "highbrow." In "The Waste Land" each human being is said to be isolated from all other human beings,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to be in a prison, the prison of the self, hearing only aethereal rumors of the external world. There are many other instances but perhaps a quotation from the "Four Quartets" is the most explicit of all:

> *So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years—*
> *Twenty years largely wasted, the years of* l'entre deux guerres—
> *Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt*
> *Is a wholly new start, and different kind of failure*
> *Because one has only learned to get the better of words*
> *For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which*
> *One is no longer disposed to say it. . . .*

Perhaps I should say at this point that I have quoted so often from the "Four Quartets" because they bear directly on Eliot's criticism, and not because I admire them very much; they seem to me one of his less successful works, although I confess that I have been unable to find anyone to agree with me. The main point is that throughout Eliot's criticism the quality of the poet's language and its effect upon the future of the English language has always concerned Eliot very much. I think we can say that never before has criticism been so conscious of all that can happen to language, how easily it can be debased, and how marvelously it can be elevated and made to illuminate the most difficult and delicate areas of experience.

VI

The fourth criterion is the dramatic sense, and Eliot maintains that all great poetry is dramatic. However, there is perhaps some confusion here, since Eliot means by dramatic the attitudes and emotions of a human being in a given situation. But when he comes to apply this broad definition, he is often influenced by his own love of Elizabethan drama, where the term, dramatic, narrows itself to the specific theatrical sense of the word, a sense in which it must be distinguished from meaning any human being's attitudes in any situation. This shift in meaning makes it possible for Eliot to say that Milton is not dramatic. For if we stick to the broad definition of the term, then, obviously, what could be more dramatic than the attitudes of Lucifer in "Paradise Lost," or the attitudes of Samson in "Samson Agonistes"? Again, if we accept Eliot's broad definition, then perhaps we must say that the "Elegy in a Country Churchyard" is just as dramatic, *qua*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dramatic, as "Hamlet, Prince of Denmark." I do not mean to say that Eliot's emphasis upon the dramatic in poetry is not justified and fruitful to a certain extent; for example, there is a sense in which we can say that Gray's Elegy is less dramatic than, let us say, Donne's "The Funeral," which might be taken as a kind of elegy. My point is that Eliot sometimes uses this criterion of the dramatic to enforce prejudices about poetry which he does not like for other reasons.

We come, finally, to the question of versification. It is here that Eliot has been most influenced by his own poetic practice. For at one time or another he has enunciated practically every possible theory of what the nature of versification is. In a late essay on the poetry of Yeats he says that blank verse cannot be written in the 20th century because it still retains its period quality. The period presumably is the Elizabethan one, and such a statement is belied by the fact that not only has some of Eliot's best poetry been written in blank verse, but such a statement disregards the triumphs of blank verse, the inexhaustible variety of this form of versification to be found in Milton, Wordsworth, in Keats' "Hyperion," in certain poems of Tennyson which Eliot himself has praised precisely for their technical mastery of blank verse, and in Browning; many other instances could be mentioned. Eliot's fundamental concern has been, however, with what he calls the "auditory imagination," "the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back; seeking the beginning and the end." This should suggest that underneath the contradictory statements about the possibilities of versification which run throughout Eliot's criticism, there is a powerful intuition of how various, unpredictable, and profound are the possibilities of language when it is versified. The quotation I have just cited should suggest certainly that Eliot has found versification a means of raising to the surface of consciousness much that is otherwise concealed. We ought to remember Goethe's remark about Wordsworth, which is quoted by Matthew Arnold in his essay on Wordsworth: that Wordsworth was deficient as a poet because he knew too well the reason he chose every word and line. This paradoxical remark is not based upon a belief that the poet ought to be irrational and spontaneous, but, I think, based upon the sense that through rhythm the poet drew upon

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

depths of being which could not be deliberately or consciously tapped. And let us remember that Goethe and Arnold were in no sense exponents of surrealism.

If we examine Eliot's scrutiny of English versification from the time of Marlowe to the time of Hardy and Yeats, and are not seduced into glib and futile logic-chopping, we come upon a theory of the nature of versification which seems to do justice to the many different things that Eliot has said about it. Namely, the theory that the essence of metre and thus of versification is any repetitive pattern of words, and the endless arguments about versification from Campion to Amy Lowell and the Free Verse movement are caused by the curious feeling that some *one* repetitive pattern, or kind of pattern, is the only true method of versification.

It will doubtless have been obvious by now that in a summary and incomplete way I have been attempting to make systematic the work of a critic who far from proceeding in terms of system or of *a priori* conceptions or of philosophical theory as to the nature of poetry has, on the contrary, developed the body of his work in the course of writing book-reviews, and essays inspired by a particular occasion. In fact, Eliot complains at one point that he often had to write criticism when he wanted to write poetry, and it is certainly true that he did not always choose the subjects of his criticism. Yet it is likely that, to proceed in this way, at the mercy of accident, editorial whim, and his own intuitive sense of what he really felt about poetry, was probably the only way in which much of Eliot's criticism could have come into being.

VII

Let me now try to place Eliot's criticism in terms of a classification which was first suggested by the late Irving Babbitt, and I believe misused by him. Babbitt speaks of impressionistic criticism, scientific criticism, neo-classic criticism, and a fourth kind to which he gives no name, except to quote Abraham Lincoln's epigram about how you can't fool all the people all the time: a kind of criticism which is sometimes called the test of time or the verdict of posterity. This fourth kind presents many difficulties, including the fact that the posterity of the past, the only posterity we know about, has

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

changed its mind so often, at different times preferring Dryden's "All for Love" to Shakespeare's "Antony and Cleopatra," not to dwell upon such sad and brutal facts as that most of Sophocles' ninety plays have disappeared, and thus evaded the test of time and the fickleness of posterity, or such another dismaying piece of information as the fact that the Romans thought Ennius, whose work has almost entirely disappeared, was a far better epic poet than Virgil. Or again, let us remember that when the Mohammedans burnt the great library at Alexandria, they destroyed survival in time as a literary criterion and a basis for literary criticism.

Babbit's other three kinds of criticism are also, I think, inadequate classifications. For example, when Babbitt speaks of scientific criticism, what he really means is historical criticism, since he cites Taine as its leading exponent. What we ought to distinguish and emphasize is the purpose which each kind of critic has in mind when he takes hold of a literary work. The neo-classic critic looks in the new literary work for the specific characteristics which he has found in masterpieces of the past, and consequently he denounces Shakespeare because he did not write like Sophocles. Thus, Voltaire condemns Shakespeare as a barbarian because he does not write like Racine. The historical critic is interested in the causes, social and biographical, of the literary work rather than in the work itself. The impressionistic critic is interested in the effects of the literary work upon himself as a delicate and rare sensibility rather than in the work as an objective and social phenomenon. The historical critic goes in back of the work to its causes; the impressionistic critic is concerned with himself rather than with the work itself; to use Pater's unfortunately immortal phrase, he wants to burn with a hard gemlike flame before the work of art, usually neglecting, in his concern with being inflamed, to distinguish and discriminate carefully between the objects which excite him. Eliot's criticism fits none of these classifications, although it is to be regretted that there has not been more of the historical critic in him. He has proceeded, as I have said, by intuition and by seeking out what most interested him from time to time. Yet, at his best he has been what I would like to call the classic kind of critic, the critic who is expert precisely because he depends upon the quality of his own experience, while, at the same time being aware that the more experience of literature he has, the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

more expert he becomes. There are no substitutes for experience, a platitude which is ignored invariably by the neo-classic critic, whose essential effort is to deduce from classics of the past a ready-made formula for judging any new work. Eliot's classicism at its best is illustrated when he says that if a truly classic work were written in our time, it would not be recognized as such by most of us. It would seem so monstrous, so queer and horrifying. This remark was made in 1933, when a good deal of James Joyce's "Finnegans Wake" had appeared and had been greeted by Eliot in the following terms, "We can't have much more of this sort of thing." Eliot has since changed his mind about this work, and though I do not know whether he considers it truly classical, certainly he admires it very much, and in this shift from dismay and perplexity to admiration we can see how the truly classical critic, the true expert, depends upon experience, and permits experience to correct his errors in appreciation. Experience is thus for the expert, or classical critic, not only the great teacher but the best text book. Eliot, in revising his initial revaluation of English poetry, has permitted experience to teach him as no theory and no authority possibly could.

Having reviewed this long and complex critical career, we come finally to the question of what conclusions we can draw and what lessons we can gain from it. It seems to me that we have reached a point in our knowledge of the history of taste, the history of literary reputation, and literary judgment, where we can clearly mark out some of the most important dangers and pitfalls involved in any kind of literary criticism. Is it not clear that the kind of action and reaction which characterizes so good a critic as Eliot may very well be the expense of spirit in a waste of false discrimination? Is it necessary, in order to praise poets A, B, and C, to condemn poets D, E, F, G, H, and the rest of the alphabet? Perhaps it is necessary, but if we think concretely of the really shocking blunders in taste which prevail throughout literary history, then perhaps the very consciousness of these blunders can help us to arrive at a point of view in which there is no mere seesaw of praise and rejection. When Dr. Johnson declared that "Lycidas" was a worthless literary production, when Turgenev said that Dostoevsky was a "morbid mediocrity," and announced that he was very bored by the first volume of "War and Peace," when Tolstoy ridiculed Shakespeare's "King Lear," and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

asserted that his own masterpieces were worthless because they could not hold the attention of peasants; or when, for that matter, Shakespeare lost his popularity with Elizabethan audiences because Beaumont and Fletcher seemed to be able to turn out the same kind of thing in a slicker style—but it is unnecessary to continue with what might be an endless catalogue. The point is that the more we know about the history of literary reputation and literary opinion, the more conscious we are of how unjust and how stupid even the greatest critics can be, the more likely we are to avoid such errors in our own experience of literature. The matter is not merely a question of the reader's welfare; the creative writer himself is crucially involved, for just as we may suppose that Shakespeare turned to romantic comedy when his popularity declined, so too it seems likely enough that the failure of "Moby Dick" and "Pierre" reduced Melville to a silence and inactivity from which he emerged now and again for 30 years with short novels which suggest how much more he might have done, given his unquestionable genius, had his greatest work received the recognition it deserved at the time it appeared instead of some thirty years after Melville's death. Thus it does not seem to me to be claiming too much for literary criticism when one declares that upon the goodness, the consciousness, and the justice of literary criticism the very existence of great works sometimes depends, not to speak of the existence of great poets, nor to dwell too much upon mighty poets in their misery dead. I should add at this point that it is only by a knowledge of the literary past that contemporary critical practice can be of much use in preventing new neglect, stupidity, unjustified admiration, and unwarranted blindness. Two of the best poets of the 19th century, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Emily Dickinson, went to their graves with hardly any external recognition; it is quite possible that they did not really know that they had written good poetry. At present Hopkins and Emily Dickinson are much admired but only at the expense of Wordsworth and Hardy. By reviewing Eliot's critical career we can envisage a point of view which will free our scrutiny of literature from many of the sins of the past, while at the same time illuminating anew all that we have inherited from the past. And we can, I think, see how it might be desirable to have no literary dictators.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Flannery O'Connor

THE HEART OF THE PARK*

Enoch Emery knew when he woke up that today the person he could show it to was going to come. He knew by his blood. He had wise blood like his daddy.

At two o'clock that afternoon, he greeted the second-shift gate guard. "You ain't but only fifteen minutes late," he said irritably. "But I stayed. I could of went on but I stayed." He wore a green uniform with yellow piping on the neck and sleeves and a yellow stripe down the outside of each leg. The second-shift guard, a boy with a jutting shale-textured face and a toothpick in his mouth, wore the same. The gate they were standing by was made of iron bars and the concrete arch that held it was fashioned to look like two trees; branches curved to form the top of it where twisted letters said, CITY FOREST PARK. The second-shift guard leaned against one of the trunks and began prodding between his teeth with the pick.

"Ever day," Enoch complained; "look like ever day I lose fifteen good minutes standing here waiting on you."

Every day when he got off duty, he went into the park, and every day when he went in, he did the same things. He went first to the swimming pool. He was afraid of the water but he liked to sit up on the bank above it if there were any women in the pool, and watch them. There was one woman who came every Monday who wore a bathing suit that was split on each hip. At first he thought she didn't know it, and instead of watching openly on the bank, he had crawled into some bushes, snickering to himself, and had watched from there. There had been no one else in the pool—the crowds didn't come until four o'clock—to tell her about the splits and she had splashed around in the water and then lain up on the edge of the pool

* This is a self-contained chapter from a novel in progress.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

asleep for almost an hour, all the time without suspecting there was somebody in the bushes looking at where she came out of the suit. Then on another day when he stopped a little later, he saw three women, all with their suits split, the pool full of people, and nobody paying them any mind. That was how the city was—always surprising him. He visited a whore every time he had two dollars to spare but he was continually being shocked by the looseness he saw in the open. He crawled into the bushes out of a sense of propriety. Very often the women would pull the suit straps down off their shoulders and lie stretched out.

The park was the heart of the city. He had come to the city and—with a knowing in his blood—he had established himself at the heart of it. Every day he looked at the heart of it; every day; and he was so stunned and awed and overwhelmed that just to think about it made him sweat. There was something, in the center of the park, that he had discovered. It was a mystery, although it was right there in a glass case for everybody to see and there was a typewritten card telling all about it right there. But there was something the card couldn't say and what it couldn't say was inside him, a terrible knowledge without any words to it, a terrible knowledge like a big nerve growing inside him. He could not show the mystery to just anybody; but he had to show it to somebody. Who he had to show it to was a special person. This person could not be from the city but he didn't know why. He knew he would know him when he saw him and he knew that he would have to see him soon or the nerve inside him would grow so big that he would be forced to rob a bank or jump on a woman or drive a stolen car into the side of a building. His blood all morning had been saying the person would come today.

He left the second-shift guard and approached the pool from a discreet footpath that led behind the ladies' end of the bath house to a small clearing where the entire pool could be seen at once. There was nobody in it—the water was bottle-green and motionless—but he saw, coming up the other side and heading for the bath house, the woman with the two little boys. She came every other day or so and brought the two children. She would go in the water with them and swim down the pool and then she would lie up on the side in the sun. She had a stained white bathing suit that fit her like a sack, and Enoch had watched her with pleasure on several occasions. He

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

moved from the clearing up a slope to some obelia bushes. There was a nice tunnel under them and he crawled into it until he came to a slightly wider place where he was accustomed to sit. He settled himself and adjusted the obelia so that he could see through it properly. His face was always very red in the bushes. Anyone who parted the obelia sprigs at just that place would think he saw a devil and would fall down the slope and into the pool. The woman and the two little boys entered the bath house.

Enoch never went immediately to the dark secret center of the park. That was the peak of the afternoon. The other things he did built up to it and they had become very formal and necessary. When he left the bushes, he would go to the FROSTY BOTTLE, a hot-dog stand in the shape of an Orange Crush with frost painted in blue around the top of it. Here he would have a chocolate malted milkshake and would make a few suggestive remarks to the waitress whom he believed to be secretly in love with him. After that he would go to see the animals. They were in a long set of steel cages like Alcatraz Penitentiary in the movies. The cages were electrically heated in the winter and air-conditioned in the summer and there were six men hired to wait on the animals and feed them T-bone steaks. The animals didn't do anything but lie around. Enoch watched them every day, full of awe and hate. Then he went *there.*

The two little boys ran out the bath house and dove into the water, and simultaneously a grating noise issued from the driveway on the other side of the pool. Enoch's head pierced out the bushes. He saw a high rat-colored car passing, which sounded as if its motor were dragging out the back. The car passed and he could hear it rattle around the turn in the drive and on away. He listened carefully, trying to hear if it would stop. The noise receded and then gradually grew louder. The car passed again. Enoch saw this time that there was only one person in it, a man. The sound of it died away again and then grew louder. The car came around a third time and stopped almost directly opposite Enoch across the pool. The man in the car looked out the window and down the grass slope to the water where the two little boys were splashing and screaming. Enoch's head was as far out the bushes as it would come and he was squinting. The door by the man was tied on with a rope. The man got out the other door and walked in front of the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

car and came halfway down the slope to the pool. He stood there a minute as if he were looking for somebody and then he sat down stiffly on the grass. He had on a suit that looked as if it had glare in it. He sat with his knees drawn up. "Well, I'll be dog," Enoch said. "Well, I'll be dog."

He began crawling out the bushes immediately, his heart moving so fast it was like one of those motorcycles at fairs that the fellow drives around the walls of a pit. He even remembered the man's name—Mr. Hazel Weaver. In a second he appeared on all fours at the end of the obelia and looked across the pool. The blue figure was still sitting there in the same position. He had the look of being held there, like by an invisible hand, like if the hand lifted up, the figure would spring across the pool in one leap without the expression on his face changing once.

The woman came out the bath house and went straight to the diving board. She spread her arms out and began to bounce, making a big heavy flapping sound with the board. Then suddenly she swirled backwards and disappeared below the water. Mr. Hazel Weaver's head turned very slowly, following her down the pool.

Enoch got up and went down the path behind the bath house. He came stealthily out on the other side and started walking toward Haze. He stayed on the top of the slope, moving softly in the grass just off the sidewalk, and making no noise. When he was directly behind him, he sat down on the edge of the sidewalk. If his arms had been ten feet long, he could have put his hands on Haze's shoulders. He studied him quietly.

The woman was climbing out the pool, chinning herself up on the side. First her face appeared, long and cadaverous, with a bandage-like bathing cap coming down almost to her eyes, and sharp teeth protruding from her mouth. Then she rose on her hands until a large foot and leg came up from behind her and another on the other side and she was out, squatting there, panting. She stood up loosely and shook herself, and stamped in the water dripping off her. She was facing them and she grinned. Enoch could see a part of Hazel Weaver's face watching the woman. It didn't grin in return but it kept on watching her as she padded over to a spot of sun almost directly under where they were sitting. Enoch had to move a little to see.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The woman sat down in the spot of sun and took off her bathing cap. Her hair was short and matted and all sorts of colors, from deep rust to a polluted lemon yellow. She shook her head and then she looked up at Hazel Weaver again, grinning through her pointed teeth. She stretched herself out in the spot of sun, raising her knees and settling her backbone down against the concrete. The two little boys, at the other end of the water, were knocking each other's heads against the side of the pool. She settled herself until she was flat against the concrete and then she reached up and pulled the bathing suit straps off her shoulders.

"King Jesus!" Enoch whispered and before he could get his eyes off the woman, Haze Weaver had sprung up and was almost to his car. The woman was sitting straight up with the suit half off her in front, and Enoch was looking both ways at once. He wrenched his attention loose from the woman and darted after Hazel Weaver.

"Wait on me!" he shouted and waved his arms in front of the car which was already rattling and starting to go. Hazel Weaver cut off the motor. His face behind the windshield was sour and frog-like; it looked like it had a shout closed up in it, it looked like one of those closet doors in gangster pictures where there is somebody tied to a chair behind it with a towel in his mouth.

"Well," Enoch said, "I declare if it ain't Hazel Weaver. How are you, Hazel?"

"The guard said I'd find you at the swimming pool," Hazel Weaver said. "He said you hid in the bushes and watched the swimming."

Enoch blushed. "I allus have admired swimming," he said. Then he stuck his head farther through the window. "You were looking for me?" he exclaimed.

"Those people," Haze said, "those people named Moats—did she tell you where they lived?"

Enoch didn't seem to hear. "You came out here special to see me?" he said.

"Asa and Sabbath Moats—she gave you the peeler. Did she tell you where they lived?"

Enoch eased his head out the car. He opened the door and climbed in beside Haze. For a minute he only looked at him, wetting his lips. Then he whispered, "I got to show you something."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'm looking for those people," Haze said. "I got to see that man. Did she tell you where they live?"

"I got to show you this thing," Enoch said. "I got to show it to you, here, this afternoon. I got to." He gripped Hazel Weaver's arm and Hazel Weaver shook him off.

"Did she tell you where they live?" he said again.

Enoch kept wetting his lips. They were pale except for his fever blister, which was purple. "Sho," he said. "Ain't she invited me to come see her and bring my harp? I got to show you this thing," he said, "then I'll tell you."

"What thing?" Haze muttered.

"This thing I got to show you," Enoch said. "Drive straight on ahead and I'll tell you where to stop."

"I *don't want to see anything of yours*," Hazel Weaver said. "I got to have that address."

"I won't be able to remember it unless you come," Enoch said. He didn't look at Hazel Weaver. He looked out the window. In a minute the car started. Enoch's blood was beating fast. He knew he had to go to the FROSTY BOTTLE and the zoo before there, and he foresaw a terrible struggle with Hazel Weaver. He would have to get him there, even if he had to hit him over the head with a rock, and carry him on his back right up to it.

Enoch's brain was divided into two parts. The part in communication with his blood did the figuring but it never said anything in words. The other part was stocked up with all kinds of words and phrases. While the first part was figuring how to get Hazel Weaver through the FROSTY BOTTLE and the zoo, the second inquired, "Where'd you git thisyer fine car? You ought to paint you some signs on the outside it, like 'step-in, baby'—I seen one with that on it, then I seen another with. . . . "

Hazel Weaver's face might have been cut out the side of a rock.

"My daddy once owned a yeller Ford automobile he won on a ticket," Enoch murmured. "It had a roll-up top and two arials and a squirril tail all come with it. He swapped it off. Stop here! Stop here!" he yelled—they were passing the FROSTY BOTTLE.

"Where is it?" Hazel Weaver said as soon as they were inside. They were in a dark room with a counter across the back of it and brown stools like toad stools in front of the counter. On the wall

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

facing the door there was a large advertisement for ice cream, showing a cow dressed like a housewife.

"It ain't here," Enoch said. "We have to stop here on the way and get something to eat. What you want?"

"Nothing," Haze muttered. He stood stiffly in the middle of the room with his hands in his pockets and his neck drawn down inside his collar.

"Well, sit down," Enoch said. "I have to have a little drink."

Something stirred behind the counter and a woman with bobbed hair like a man's got up from a chair where she had been reading the newspaper, and came forward. She looked sourly at Enoch. She had on a once-white uniform clotted with brown stains. "What you want?" she said in a loud voice, leaning close to his ear as if he were deaf. She had a man's face and big muscled arms.

"I want a chocolate malted milkshake, baby girl," Enoch said softly. "I want a lot of ice cream in it."

She turned fiercely from him and glared at Haze.

"He says he don't want nothing but to sit down and look at you for a while," Enoch said. "He ain't hungry but for just to see you."

Haze looked woodenly at the woman and she turned her back on him and began mixing the milkshake. He sat down on the last stool in the row and started cracking his knuckles.

Enoch watched him carefully. "I reckon you done changed some," he murmured after a few minutes.

Haze's neck jerked around and he started forward. "Give me those people's address. Right now," he said.

It came to Enoch in an instant. The police. His face was suddenly suffused with secret knowledge. "I reckon you ain't as uppity as you used to be," he said. "I reckon maybe," he said, "you ain't got so much cause now as you had then." Stole theter automobile, he thought.

Hazel Weaver sat back down. There was no expression on his face but inside his sour wet eyes, something moved. He turned away from Enoch.

"How come you jumped up so fast down yonder at the pool?" Enoch asked. The woman turned around to him with the malted milk in her hand. "Of course," he said evilly, "I wouldn't have had no truck with a ugly dish like that neither."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The woman thumped the malted milk on the counter in front of him. "Fifteen cents," she roared.

"You're worth more than that, baby girl," Enoch said. He snickered and began gassing his malted milk through the straw.

The woman strode over to where Haze was. "What do you come in here with a son of a bitch like that for?" she shouted. "A nice quiet boy like you to come in here with a son of a bitch. You ought to mind the company you keep." Her name was Maude and she drank whiskey all day from a fruit jar under the counter. "Jesus," she said, wiping her hand under her nose. She sat down in a straight chair in front of Haze but facing Enoch, and folded her arms across her chest. "Ever day," she said to Haze, looking at Enoch, "ever day that son of a bitch comes in here."

Enoch was thinking about the animals. They had to go next to the animals. He hated them; just thinking about them made his face turn a chocolate purple color as if the malted milk were rising in his head.

"You're a nice boy," she said, "I can see you got a clean nose, well keep it clean, don't go messin with a son of a bitch like that yonder. I always know a clean boy when I see one." She was shouting at Enoch, but Enoch watched Hazel Weaver. It was like something inside Hazel Weaver was winding up, although he didn't move on the outside, not even his hands. He just looked pressed down in that blue suit, like inside it, the thing winding was getting tighter and tighter. Enoch's blood told him to hurry. He raced the milkshake up the straw.

"Yes sir," she said, "there ain't anything sweeter than a clean boy. God for my witness. And I know a clean one when I see him and I know a son a bitch when I see him and there's a lot of difference and that pus-marked bastard zlurping through that straw is a goddammed son a bitch and you a clean boy had better mind how you keep him company. I know a clean boy when I see one."

Enoch screeched in the bottom of his glass. He fished fifteen cents from his pocket and laid it on the counter and got up. But Hazel Weaver was already up; he was leaning over the counter toward the woman. She didn't see him right away because she was looking at Enoch. He leaned on his hands over the counter until his face was just a foot from hers. She turned around and stared at him.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Come on," Enoch started, "we don't have no time to be sassing around with her. I got to show you this right away, I got. . . ."

"I ain't clean," Haze said.

It was not until he said it again that Enoch heard the words.

"I ain't clean," he said again, without any expression on his face or in his voice, just looking at the woman as if he were looking at a piece of wood.

She stared at him, startled and then outraged. "What do you think I care!" she screamed. "Why should I give a goddamm what you are?"

"Come on," Enoch whined, "come on or I won't tell you where them people live." He caught Haze's arm and pulled him back from the counter and toward the door.

"You bastard!" the woman screamed, "what do you think I care about any of you filthy boys?"

Hazel Weaver pushed the door open quickly and went out. He got back in his car, and Enoch jumped in behind him. "Okay," Enoch said, "drive straight on ahead down this road."

"What do you want for telling me?" Haze said. "I'm not staying here. I have to go. I can't stay here any longer."

Enoch shuddered. He began wetting his lips. "I got to show it to you," he said hoarsely. "I can't show it to nobody but you. I had a sign it was you when I seen you drive up at the pool. I knew all morning somebody was gonna come and then when I saw you at the pool, I had thisyer sign."

"I don't care about your signs," Haze said.

"I go to see it ever day," Enoch said. "I go ever day but I ain't ever been able to take nobody else with me. I had to wait on the sign. I'll tell you them people's address just as soon as you see it. You got to see it," he said. "When you see it, something's going to happen."

"Nothing's going to happen," Haze said.

He started the car again and Enoch sat forward on the seat. "Them animals," he muttered. "We got to walk by them first. It won't take long for that. It won't take a minute." He saw the animals waiting evil-eyed for him, ready to throw him off time. He thought what if the police were screaming out here now with sirens and squad cars and they got to Hazel Weaver just before he showed it to him.

"I got to see those people," Haze said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Stop here! Stop here!" Enoch cried.

There was a long shining row of steel cages over to the left and behind the bars, black figures were sitting or pacing. "Get out," Enoch said. "This won't take one second."

Haze got out. Then he stopped. "I got to see those people," he said.

"Okay, okay, come on," Enoch whined.

"I don't believe you know the address."

"I do! I do!" Enoch cried. "It begins with a two, now come on!" He pulled Haze toward the cages. There were two black bears in the first one. They were sitting facing each other like two matrons having tea, their faces polite and self-absorbed. "They don't do nothing but sit there all day and stink," Enoch said. "A man comes and washes theseyer cages out ever morning with a hose and it stinks just as much as if he'd left it." Every animal there had a personal haughty hatred for him like society people have for climbers. He went on past two more cages of bears, not even looking at them, and then he stopped at the next cage where there were two yellow-eyed wolves nosing around the edges of the concrete. "Hyenas," he said. "I ain't got no use for hyenas." He leaned closer and spit into the cage, hitting one of the wolves on the leg. It shuttled to the side, giving him a slanted evil look. For a second he forgot Hazel Weaver. Then he looked back quickly to make sure he was still there. He was right behind him. He was not looking at the animals. Thinking about them police, Enoch thought. He said, "Come on, we don't have to look at all theseyer monkeys that come next." Usually he stopped at every cage and made an obscene comment aloud to himself, but today the animals were only a form he had to get through. He hurried past the cages of monkeys, looking back two or three times to make sure Hazel Weaver was behind him. At the last of the monkey cages, he stopped as if he couldn't help himself.

"Look at that ape," he said, glaring. The animal had its back to him, grey except for a small pink seat. "If I had a ass like that," he said prudishly, "I'd sit on it. I wouldn't be exposing it to all these people come to this park. Come on, we don't have to look at theseyer birds that come next." He ran past the cages of birds and then he was at the end of the zoo. "Now we don't need the car," he said, going on ahead, "we'll go right down that hill yonder through them

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

trees." He stopped and saw that Hazel Weaver instead of being behind him had stopped at the last cage for birds. "Oh Jesus," he groaned. He stood and waved his arms wildly and shouted, "come on!" but Haze didn't move from where he was looking into the cage.

Enoch ran back to him and grabbed him by the arm but Haze pushed him off absently and kept on looking in the cage. It was empty. Enoch stared. "It's empty!" he shouted. "What do you have to look in that ole empty cage for? You come on." He stood there, sweating and purple. "It's empty!" he shouted; and then he saw it wasn't empty. Over in one corner on the floor of the cage, there was an eye. The eye was in the middle of something that looked like a piece of mop and the piece of mop was sitting on an old rag. He squinted close to the wire and saw that the piece of mop was an owl with one eye open. It was looking directly at Hazel Weaver. "That ain't nothing but an ole hoot owl," he moaned. "You seen them before."

"I ain't clean," Haze said to the eye. He said it just like he said it to the woman in the FROSTY BOTTLE. The eye shut softly and the owl turned its head to the wall.

He's done murdered somebody, Enoch thought. "Oh sweet Jesus come on!" he wailed. "I got to show you this right now." He pulled him away but a few feet from the cage Haze stopped again, looking at something in the distance. Enoch's eyesight was very poor. He squinted and made out a figure far down the road behind them. There were two smaller figures jumping on either side of it.

Hazel Weaver turned back to him suddenly and said, "Where's this thing? Let's see it right now. Come on."

"Ain't that where I been trying to take you," Enoch murmured. He felt the perspiration drying on him and stinging and his skin began to get pin-pointed, even in his scalp. "We got to go on foot," he said.

"Why? Haze muttered.

"I don't know," Enoch said. He knew something was going to happen to him. He *knew* now something was going to happen to him. His blood stopped beating. All the time it had been beating like drum noises and now it had stopped. They started down the hill. It was a steep hill, full of trees painted white from the ground up four feet. They looked as if they had on ankle-socks. He gripped

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Hazel Weaver's arm. "It gets damp as you go down," he said, looking around vaguely. Hazel Weaver shook him off. In a second, he gripped his arm again and stopped him. He pointed down through the trees. "Muvseevum," he said. The strange word made him shiver. That was the first time he had ever said it aloud. A piece of gray building was showing where he pointed. It grew larger as they went down the hill, then as they came to the end of the wood and stepped out on the gravel drive way, it seemed to shrink suddenly. It was round and soot-colored. There were columns at the front of it and in between each column there was an eyeless stone woman holding a pot on her head. A concrete band was over the columns and the letters M V S E V M were cut into it. Enoch was afraid to pronounce the word again.

"We got to go up the steps and through the front door," he whispered. There were ten steps up to the porch. The door was wide and black. Enoch pushed it in cautiously and inserted his head in the crack. In a minute he brought it out again and said, "All right, go in and walk easy. I don't want to wake up theter ole guard. He ain't very friendly with me." They went into a dark hall. It was heavy with the odor of linoleum and creosote and another odor behind these two. The third one was an undersmell and Enoch couldn't name it as anything he had ever smelled before. There was nothing in the hall but two urns and an old man asleep in a straight chair against the wall. He had on the same kind of uniform as Enoch and he looked like a dried up spider stuck there. Enoch looked at Hazel Weaver to see if he was smelling the undersmell. He looked like he was; Enoch's blood began beating again, and the sound was nearer this time like the drums had moved up about a quarter of a mile. He gripped Haze's arm and tip-toed through the hall to another black door at the end of it. He cracked it a little and inserted his head in the crack. Then in a second he drew it out and crooked his finger in a gesture for Haze to follow him. They went into another hall, like the last one but running crosswise. "It's in that first door yonder," Enoch said in a small voice. They went into a dark room full of glass cases. The glass cases covered the walls and there were three coffin-like ones in the middle of the floor. The ones on the walls were full of birds tilted on varnished sticks and looking down with dried piquant expressions.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Come on," Enoch whispered. The drum noises in his blood were getting closer and closer. He went past the two cases in the middle of the floor and toward the third one. He went to the farthest end of it and stopped. He stood looking down with his neck thrust forward and his hands clutched together; Hazel Weaver moved up beside him.

The two of them stood there, Enoch rigid and Hazel Weaver bent slightly forward. There were three bowls and a row of blunt weapons and a man in the case. It was the man Enoch was looking at. He was about three feet long. He was naked and a dried yellow color and his eyes were squinched shut as if a giant block of steel were falling down on top of him.

"See theter notice," Enoch said in a church whisper, pointing to a typewritten card at the man's foot, "it says he was once as tall as us. Some A-rabs did it to him in six months." He turned his head cautiously to see Hazel Weaver.

All he could tell was that Hazel Weaver's eyes were on the shrunken man. He was bent forward so that his face was reflected in the glass top of the case. The reflection was pale and the eyes were like two clean bullet holes. Enoch waited, rigid. He heard footsteps in the hall. Oh Jesus Jesus, he prayed, let him hurry up and do whatever he's going to do! The footsteps came in the door. He saw the woman with the two little boys. She had one by each hand, and she was grinning. Hazel Weaver had not raised his eyes once from the shrunken man. The woman came toward them. She stopped on the other side of the case and looked down into it, and the reflection of her face appeared grinning on the glass, over Hazel Weaver's. She snickered and put two fingers in front of her teeth. The little boys' faces were like pans set on either side to catch the grins that overflowed from her. Haze's neck jerked back and he made a noise. It was a noise like Enoch hadn't ever heard before. It might have come from the man inside the case. In a second Enoch knew it had. "Wait!" he screamed, and tore out the room after Hazel Weaver.

He overtook him half way up the hill. He caught him by the arm and swung him around and then he stood there, suddenly weak and light as a balloon, and stared. Hazel Weaver grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him. "What is that address!" he shouted. "Give me that address!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Henry Bamford Parkes

POE, HAWTHORNE, MELVILLE: AN ESSAY IN SOCIOLOGICAL CRITICISM

Although the relationship between the creative writer and the society to which he belongs is one of the perennial problems of criticism, it has usually been discussed in decidedly superficial terms, chiefly because the issues tend to be confused by a conflict about values. In general, those critics who have been most anxious to emphasize the sociological implications of literature have belonged, politically, to the left, and have required that writers should deal realistically with social problems and should advocate reform or revolution. Judging art by political rather than by aesthetic criteria, they have accused writers whose work lacked explicit political content of trying to escape from reality into an ivory tower. On the other hand, the practitioners of a strictly aesthetic criticism have often been inclined to consider art as a wholly autonomous activity, to be valued not for its content but for the technical skill displayed in it.

Obviously a complete interpretation of a work of art ought to take account both of aesthetic and of sociological factors. A correct definition of the relationship between the writer and society ought to make it possible to regard these two methods of approach as complementary rather than as mutually exclusive.

Every imaginative writer is engaged in giving expression to his own view of life and his own emotional attitudes. His primary social function is to heighten and enrich the consciousness of his readers and to extend their range of emotional awareness, for which reason the value of his work depends upon the precision and completeness of the communication, not upon the moral and political implications which may be deduced from it. This is as true of the realistic novelist as it is of any other kind of writer. The realist derives his material from social problems and conflicts, but this is always filtered through his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

own temperament and takes its color from his own emotional biases and obsessions. His major characters are likely, in fact, to be projections of emotional forces within his own personality just as much as are those of the avowed symbolist or fantasist.

Every writer, however, grows up as a member of a particular society, and the structure of his personality, his view of life and his emotional conflicts and consummations are conditioned by social factors. He is likely, moreover, to be generally receptive to those broad currents of thought and feeling which are shared by the other members of his society. For this reason the content of his work, including its deeper emotional quality as well as its subject-matter, cannot be explained without reference to the social background. In revealing himself the writer also reflects his society; he indicates what type of personality and what forms of emotional experience may develop within that society, and this reflection may often be most significant where it is least deliberate.

While a knowledge of social forces is necessary for a full understanding of literature, the study of literature may, in turn, illuminate society. It may enable us to understand it more completely, and on a deeper psychological level, than if we restrict ourselves to the relatively superficial level of its political and economic organization. The literature of a society may show not merely how its members acted but what they thought and felt; it may indicate those emotional aspirations, conflicts and frustrations which do not manifest themselves overtly in political programs but which are, nevertheless, among the ultimate determinants of the course of history. Such a use of literature as sociological material is hazardous unless there is corroborative evidence. For a writer is not necessarily typical of his society, or even of that élite group which initiates changes of attitude; his experience is often eccentric and his degree of maladjustment greater. But it is often possible to trace a high degree of correlation between literary evidence and subsequent historical developments. To cite one obvious example, the debacle of European civilization was foreshadowed much more clearly in the imaginative literature of the nineteen-twenties than in the writings of any economists, sociologists or political theorists.

I propose to illustrate these suggestions by considering certain

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

aspects of the American literature of the early nineteenth century. The most significant imaginative writers of the period were Poe, Melville and Hawthorne. All these men were primarily concerned with giving expression to their own view of life rather than with realistic social observation. Their work, nevertheless, illuminates the social background, although the sociological inferences which can be drawn from it may appear somewhat strange to those who know pre-Civil War America only from its political and intellectual history.

In their personal temperament and standards of value these three writers were utterly different from each other. Poe, a victim of acute neurotic insecurities, attributed a pseudo-religious significance to the enjoyment of "Beauty" and tried to use it as a means of escape into a dream-world of his own creation. Melville fought a long battle with his environment and was never able either to repudiate it or to come to terms with it. Hawthorne, the most nearly normal of the three, was more successful in adjusting to reality chiefly because he was a man of low emotional pressure who made few demands. Yet in spite of these differences, the same general framework of experience, defining the problems with which they were concerned and determining their expectations, can be traced through the writings of all three men. What they have in common with each other is more fundamental than the divergencies.

The most essential resemblance between them is that they all assume the individual to be isolated and regard this isolation as a problem. What is lacking in their framework of experience is any sense of society as a kind of organic whole to which the individual belongs and in which he has his appointed place. And lacking the notion of social continuity and tradition, they lack also the corresponding metaphysical conception of the natural universe as an ordered unity which harmonizes with human ideals. In this respect their view of life differs from that of most European writers; and if we go back to earlier periods of history, the difference becomes more marked. Elizabethan literature, for example, is pervaded with the belief in both a cosmic and a social order, although it displays also a strong sense of the possibility of chaos; the tension between order and chaos is, in fact, its central theme. But for the Americans there is no underlying order, and each individual must find his own way of dealing with chaos.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In general, Poe and Hawthorne may be regarded as polar opposites in their attitude towards isolation, since Poe tries to carry it to its ultimate limits while Hawthorne regards it as the cardinal sin. The most powerful of Poe's stories all deal with some young man who is marked out from the rest of mankind by unusual talents or desires or by some crime or abnormality and who cherishes his own isolation. And while there is a neurotic compulsiveness in his flight from ordinary humanity, his ultimate inability to find any lasting happiness is also in conformity with the neurotic pattern. Living in solitary grandeur, pursuing recondite forms of learning or sensuous pleasure or (occasionally) committing strange sins, he is usually destined for sorrow or for untimely death. This is the melancholy aristocrat of *The House of Usher* and *Ligeia,* the misanthrope of *The Gold-Bug,* the omniscient analyst of *The Murders in the Rue Morgue,* the debauché of *William Wilson,* and the criminal of *Hop-Frog* and *The Black Cat.* In general, he is characterized by a fantastic exaggeration of the will to power, as manifested in unusual learning or intellectual capacity, in great wealth, in exemption from ordinary moral rules, or occasionally in the ability even to conquer death. And although he is usually a doomed soul, there is little suggestion that it was ever within his power to achieve a happier destiny. His position is like that of the prince in *The Red Death,* who shuts himself into an abbey in the hope of escaping from the plague. Poe premises isolation, and assumes that the individual must seek security by trying to make it complete.

In a number of the short stories of Hawthorne we find a similar situation, but presented from the opposite angle. The typical Hawthorne character is emotionally (if not physically) isolated; but his isolation is attributed to some sinful desire or some form of spiritual pride which prevents him from loving other human beings. It is therefore regarded as evil. The theme is stated most clearly, although embroidered with those symbolic illustrations which are so characteristic of Hawthorne's peculiar method of writing, in such stories as *Ethan Brand, Rappaccini's Daughter, Lady Eleanore's Mantle, The Christmas Banquet,* and *The Bosom Serpent.* The novels preach the same lesson, but present a more complex view of life. Two images are placed in opposition to each other, suggesting two different kinds of isolation: that of the puritan magistrate or reformer, who is

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

characterized by arrogant self-righteousness, avarice and love of power; and that of the witch, who represents, in general, the repressed elements in the puritan psyche. In *The Scarlet Letter* this opposition is indicated chiefly through the environmental setting, in the contrast between Boston and the forest. In *The House of the Seven Gables* the two images are embodied in the two hostile familes, the Pyncheons and the Maules, while in *The Blithedale Romance* they reappear in the personalities of Hollingsworth and Zenobia. And both the magistrate and the witch, in contrasting ways, have cut themselves off from ordinary humanity and are therefore damned.

Yet while Hawthorne states clearly enough what he regards as evil, it is difficult to derive from his writings any positive conception of good. Profoundly skeptical about all social reforms, convinced of the innate sinfulness of the human heart, he seems to regard almost any form of unusual ambition or achievement as a symptom of pride and lack of love. The alternative to isolation is apparently to remain content with things as they are. The desire for perfection (as in *The Birthmark*) leads to destruction. That achievement may be social rather than private, or that it may be a means of reuniting the individual with society, are possibilities which are scarcely considered.

Melville differs from both Poe and Hawthorne in that he has a positive conception of solidarity. This solidarity, however, can be found only in the miniature world of the ship, which is transitory and artificial, and ceases as soon as the sailor goes ashore. Ashore, as in the Liverpool scenes of *Redburn,* in the concluding chapters of *Israel Potter,* and in *Pierre,* the individual is utterly and hopelessly alone. This aloneness is not glorified, as in Poe, or attributed to sin, as in Hawthorne; it is simply stated as an inescapable part of the general misery of human existence. And although the individual can sometimes (by no means always, as *Redburn* demonstrates) find a place for himself as a member of a ship's crew, his isolation is only transferred thereby to a different plane. The ultimate relationship between man and the universe is, for Melville, one of conflict rather than of underlying unity and harmony. The human being can choose, like Ahab, to go to sea, do battle with the white whale, and die heroically; or he can remain ashore and die ignobly. Whether he asserts his will or denies it, he is, in the end, alone.

Thus all three of these writers present individuals who lack the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sense of belonging to a social organism and whose relationships with other men, are, in consequence, disturbed and insecure. When we consider their relationships with women, we find that this feeling of insecurity becomes even stronger and more compulsive. A normal and healthy sexuality is, in fact, conspicuously absent not only from these writers but from almost the whole of nineteenth-century American literature. If this were merely the result of Victorian prudery, it would not call particularly for comment. What is significant, however, is not merely the lack of normal sexual emotion but the dubious or abnormal quality of such emotion as does manifest itself. Once again, the Elizabethans can appropriately be used as a standard for comparison. Sexual experience, as presented in the Elizabethan drama, is sometimes consummatory, sometimes destructive, and sometimes (as in *Antony and Cleopatra*) both at the same time. But there is never any doubt that it is fully adult and that each of the two participants is equally and maturely active.

Hawthorne is the least abnormal of the three writers, but his normality is apparently associated with a low vitality and lack of strong positive emotion. He does not regard sexual desire in itself as evil (the act of adultery in which the plot of *The Scarlet Letter* originates is not presented as inherently, rather than conventionally, sinful; what is inherently sinful is Dimmesdale's concealment of it and his consequent isolation). He can feel comfortable, however, only with a woman who remains passive and lacks vital energy (such as Priscilla in *The Blithedale Romance*). The woman of strong sexual vitality (Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance* and Miriam in *The Marble Faun*) is evil. Both Zenobia and Miriam are compared to witches, and are wrapped in a sinister aura of diabolism; and both of them come to bad ends.

With both Poe and Melville we definitely cross the borders of the abnormal. With each of them sexuality is conceived in immature terms, with a dominating mother-image, a strong flavor of incest, and (with Melville) an apparent element of homosexuality. In the case of Poe there is an obvious similarity between the fantasies expressed in his stories and poems and the actual way of life which he adopted when he took his fourteen-year-old cousin as a wife and found a mother in his aunt. From the evidence of his writings it would appear that he could most easily imagine a close union with a sister

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

or a cousin (as in *Eleanora, Berenice,* and *The House of Usher*), that he was inhibited from full consummation by some forbidding image from the past (as in *Ulalume*), and that he was haunted by fantasies in which sexuality was associated with death. Necrophilia is, in fact, one of his favorite themes, as in poems such as *Annabel Lee* and stories such as *Ligeia* and *The Oblong Box.* In *The Philosophy of Literary Composition* he explains that the death of a beautiful woman is the supremely poetic subject. It apparently gave him that thrill of the nerves which he identified with aesthetic experience and interpreted in pseudo-religious Platonic terms.

Of Melville's actual married life we know almost nothing. In his writings he presents normal masculine emotion only in association with the Marquesan girl with whom he lived in Typee, in surroundings as different as possible from his home. Elsewhere the only characters towards whom he feels warmly and affectionately are men; his sailor companions, Toby, Harry Bolton, Jack Chase, even the savage Queequeg, seem to establish the norm by which all other relationships are judged and condemned. Apart from *Typee,* in fact, only two of his books, *Mardi* and *Pierre,* deal with women at all. *Mardi* is a very uneven book, beginning on a realistic level and then changing into a fantasy, and containing inordinately long stretches of low-pressure writing. When Melville touches the sexual theme, however, his prose loses its flatness and becomes vibrant. Through most of the book the narrator is pursuing a beautiful girl called Yillah. When he finally finds her, she has mysteriously become identified with a forbidding mother-image called Hautia, a wicked enchantress by whom men are enslaved. The narrator quickly abandons Yillah-Hautia and flies away across the open sea. The general parallelism with the theme stated in Poe's *Ulalume* is obvious. In *Pierre* Melville deals with similar subject matter in realistic rather than allegorical terms. At the beginning of the novel the hero is living with his mother, a selfish, arrogant and domineering woman, towards whom he conducts himself like a lover rather than a son. He then discovers that he has a half-sister, for whom he feels an incestuous attraction, and this brings about his destruction. *Pierre* is an unsuccessful novel, chiefly perhaps because Melville was dealing with material which, for both social and personal reasons, he could not make wholly explicit; but its general implications are sufficiently clear.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

How far should these men be regarded as having given a valid portrayal of the American personality structure, and what sociological inferences should be drawn from their writings? Presumably they were concerned with the problem of isolation because they lived in a society which was violently competitive. Based on a capitalistic economy and composed predominantly of individuals who were on the make and whose values were acquisitive and pecuniary, American society as a whole was lacking in the sense of continuity and tradition and of human solidarity. The ultimate relationship between human beings, as defined by the principles of the economy, was conceived in terms of conflict rather than of cooperation. Consciously and explicitly, however, the individualism of American society, and its belief in open rather than closed systems, both politically and metaphysically, were generally regarded as its major virtues, not only by the average citizen but by its leading philosophic spokesmen. Emerson glorified self-reliance and tried to elevate it from an economic to a spiritual truth. The work of William James, in the following generation, had a similar tendency. But imaginative literature is concerned not with what men ought to feel but with what they actually do feel; and in the imaginative literature of the pre-Civil War period we find a statement of the psychological costs of individualism, which can be regarded as a destructive analysis of the principle of self-reliance and of American ideals in general.

The themes which these three writers initiated have, moreover, continued to be characteristic of American literature, although in the twentieth century they have been presented with more conscious awareness of their sociological implications. Twentieth-century novelists have continued to present the individual as isolated and as compelled to do battle with his environment; stated in different forms by such various writers as Dreiser, Anderson, Dos Passos and Wolfe, this has continued to be perhaps the most distinctive note of American literature. And although (beginning with Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*) men and women in American novels have found it easier to achieve sexual union, the successful performance of this enterprise has still been fraught with psychological hazards. In particular, there has been a recurrent suggestion, made most explicitly in certain writings of Hemingway and Scott Fitzgerald, of feminine dominance and masculine resentment against it.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Whether the kind of maladjustments with which Poe, Hawthorne and Melville were concerned can be regarded as typical of the society of their time we have no means of knowing. Since all sensitive individuals are, in some degree, atypical, and since in America the writer in particular is likely to be a social misfit, it would be hazardous to argue that their portrayal of the American character had any general application. In the twentieth century, however, we begin to find corroborative evidence. The American of the eighteen-forties may have been usually well-adjusted. But as a whole generation of psychiatrists and sociologists have insisted, the American of the nineteen-forties is often unhappy, inhibited and insecure; and the form which his maladjustments take is very likely to fit in with the general pattern defined by the writers of a hundred years ago. Concerned not with society but with their own conflicts and frustrations, Poe, Hawthorne and Melville may not have been social observers, but they appear to have been valid social prophets. For what is foreshadowed in their books, in Poe's search for individual security through power, in Hawthorne's distrust of anything which separates the individual from the average level, in Melville's pervasive sense of conflict and chaos, and in the sexual fears and infantilisms of all three men, is the neurotic personality of the twentieth century.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

George Barbarow

OUR LAST POET

He had been running steadily for two days since leaving the car, and he had run for one day before getting in the car, so the time was now about four days since he had made the break from J.F.'s office. It seemed in recollection that the first day had been the worst, for then he had had the problem of learning to replenish his strength and to do without food and water. And the worst night had been the first night, when he and his pursuers, having "agreed" to go ahead without stopping, had been committed to stay awake, albeit the three of them did not run, but walked, during the hours of darkness.

The first day had been desperate, because then he had still believed he would be able to throw them off by superior speed and skill, and he had attempted a number of ingenious tricks, such as hiding behind rocks and diving into patches of woodland that they occasionally passed along the road. However, since this was puzzle work, and even the greatest puzzle could always be solved by second-rate minds, he had seen them picking up the track by the infallible deductive method, and unerringly making their way to his hiding place. Nevertheless, he had done this kind of dodging because it always seems better to do something about one's plight than to stand helpless in plain sight.

It had been an absurd mistake to steal the car and drive it dangerously at ninety miles an hour on the straight stretches, and even more dangerously in the mountain passes on the endless, snakily reversing curves. At first he had been sure that he had found a way to outrun the pursuit (there was hardly another car like it for power in three states), and so he had allowed himself to think once more of the last interview with J.F., when the great man had suddenly revealed himself for what he was. "What he was," of course, was what he was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in the mind of the poet: an ogre, repulsive, hairy, and with slavering jaws, aggressively befanged, smelling of blood. The trouble with driving the car had been the possibility of a wreck while thinking of J.F., and there had been no advantage in it after the two pursuers had also obtained a car, and had been keeping within half a mile of their quarry. If their car had happened to be inferior, they had more than made up for it by taking turns at the wheel. All in all, it had promised to be a very long chase, with endurance more important than distance, so he had stopped the car at sunset and had gone off into the fields, climbed a little knoll not fifty yards away, and watched them come up to his empty car, where they stopped. There had been a little time to sit down and reflect about his position, which was hopeless, and not a little silly. His gift of divination had told him this even before he had started. They would eventually run him into a trap. In large lines, his flight was only a gesture, but he was compelled to make it.

It had been at this car-transfer that they had also put on their overcoats, seeing that it was probable that the "game" would go up into the hills, where it would be very cold, and they were ordinary humans, requiring the kind of protection that the poet scorned by nature. It had been here also that the first conversation had taken place. The short man had spoken after he had put on the ridiculously long coat, down to his ankles. His voice had carried well and clearly through the still air.

"De Parter!"

"Yes."

"Can you hear me?"

"Very well."

"All right. We want to say that J.F. has asked you to come back. That's the message he told us to give you."

"Does J.F. think I'm a lunatic?"

"He didn't tell us directly, but he said that all poets are lunatics, and later his first secretary said that J.F. regards you as the last poet, so, according to our system of logic, it is our belief that J.F. thinks you are a lunatic, yes."

"Does J.F. want me to live in Hollywood and work for him, if I go back?"

"We don't have that information from J.F. personally, but his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

second secretary said that he remarked that he wants you to be hired to him and to nobody else. She said she didn't think, on the basis of all that he has said, that he would ever take you into the courts if you refused to work, but he is supposed to be very firm about having your contract and using your name in the credits, and he is supposed to be confident that you will continue to write poetry and publish it in the respectable intellectual magazines. The second secretary has had it from the first secretary, she said, that J. F. doesn't give a hoot, personally, about you or your poetry, but he wants to impress the other producers on account of your being the last poet. We suspect that he wants you to live in Hollywood, too, but we don't have any evidence except a lot of gossip."

De Parter hadn't expected the little man to say so much, and thought he should be rewarded. After two days of silence, he had gained some pleasure out of hearing a human voice, no matter what it said. He had replied that he thought there was a shorter coat in the big car. The little man had found it and put it on, saying it was perhaps three inches shorter. The tall man had found one that fitted very well. While the little one had rummaged in the car, the other had asked an important question.

"Have you any message for J.F. in case you get killed up in the mountains, or in case we don't have a chance to talk again?"

"A very good question," De Parter had said, "to which the answer is no."

"Do you mean that you refuse to go back? Or do you mean that you have no message for J.F.?"

"It's a double negative. Figure it out for yourselves."

"We can't because you're a poet. Tell us in plain language."

De Parter had then made a very long statement, of which he was later secretly ashamed. He had talked at length about being "in the throes," so that plain language was impossible. Noticing (the setting sun glinted on their gold pencils) that they were carefully writing down the statement, he had been led on to speak at random about the problems of a poet, concluding that all he could say, "in the long run," was that his original answer would have to stand, "provisionally, of course," since "I don't know, any more than you know, what the result of all this effort will be."

At the end they had asked, "Is that all?" and waited for him to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

say more. At that very moment, the whole western sky was filled with the infinite shades of pink and red, gold, blue, and purple, and, suddenly inspired, De Parter had done a very strange thing. Standing silent through the most intense period of coloration, he had then advanced a step in the direction of the two pursuers, and had *stretched out both his hands* towards them.

"Brothers!" he had said, his voice loud and saturated with emotion, "Brothers, understand me. I am speaking directly to you." He had then made a passionate appeal to them, which they had not attempted to write down, having put up their pencils as soon as his talk had become personal. The conclusion had been perfectly plain: that he wished them to join him, "unite with" him, against J.F.

"No!" they had both shouted in chorus, "Not against J.F.!"

De Parter, now thoroughly excited, and clearly angered by their refusal, had himself shouted in reply to their loyalty that "J.F. is an ogre, and his employees are his victims!"

The wild accusation apparently had not affected the two listeners in the slightest, for they had remained silent. After a full minute of anxious waiting, De Parter had determined to ask a final question of them. By this time the sun had gone, and there had been nothing but a few black, ragged clouds left as remnants of the brilliant display. De Parter had been burned out too, for his last question had been spoken in a tone of hopelessness.

"Do *you* believe I'm a lunatic?"

"We can't answer directly, because the question is framed in terms of belief, about which we have no certain information. Nevertheless, by process of deduction from your extraordinary words and actions, and in view of our own belief that J.F. thinks you are a lunatic, we incline towards that conclusion ourselves. Do you want us to tell you the various steps in our logical deduction?"

This combination of answer and question had been spoken slowly, and after another period of apparent deliberation, so, when the little man had come to the end, it was quite dark. De Parter had then quickly answered "No," and had ended the colloquy by stepping down the far side of the knoll. Walking briskly across the desert in the general direction of the mountains, he had soon snapped on his flashlight, an action imitated at once by the pursuers.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

2.

This remarkable chase was carried out a few months before the official beginning of the great war that is still raging with unabated fury. De Parter was indeed the last poet, a man of amazing artistic talent and of surpassing ingenuity. Where all the others had laid aside their pens, to take up lecturing, or to join various armies, or to form political parties; where some had accepted work in government agencies, and others had become expert speechwriters and manifesto pronouncers, De Parter had continued to be a poet. He took it as an honor that the others attacked him on all sides, offering as proof of his venial weakness that he was an employee of J.F., and was using the connection to impress editors into accepting and publishing his verse. In this time of decision, they raged, De Parter, of all people, ought to come out of his egotistical individualism and participate in the common front against the enemies of humanity.

I am making no attempt to decide the rightness or wrongness of De Parter and his critics. I say these things because it may be thought necessary to explain why there was only one poet left, and how close, as we have seen, he came to joining the rest of them when he allowed himself to slip into making that uncharacteristic speech beginning with "Brothers!" Not only was it sentimental and essentially maudlin; it was also delivered to a pair of obvious stooges, and was immediately inspired by the kind of a sunset that the vulgar always imagine "no artist can paint."

One too easily forgets that De Parter had then ended two days of frantic flight from the horrible image of the man who owned his contract, and that the image seen in his brilliant mind was part of a moment of terrifying acuity, so that J.F. was actually transformed into the ogre that we too have only occasionally and partially glimpsed. After this great shock, he had run and walked and driven a car for several days without sleep, food, or drink, closely followed by two of J.F.'s most trusted operatives.

These men, the tall and the short of it, had orders to bring back the poet as soon as he should fall exhausted. They could not fight with him, or argue, but only stay near him. J.F. had wisely realized, having had considerable experience with poets, that he might hope for no good results by being, or seeming to be, angry or vin-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dictive. At the same time, he must always avoid the appearance of neglect or unconcern, for this is how Monte de la Roche (J.F.'s keenest rival) had lost *his* last poet not two weeks before. The fellow had pined, and then had gone off to face the virtual certainty of starvation in the Chinese army. J.F. knew that he would one day be forced to endure the temporary defection of De Parter, and only hoped that something good would come of it.

3.

On the fourth day, at noon, De Parter reached the foot of the nameless chain of mountains toward which he had been walking. It was nothing more than a heap of gravel, by our standards of beauty, but there must have been something attractive about it, for he started to climb without stopping, looking back only once to locate the pursuers.

They later reported that they were very tired, but managed to keep up with the poet quite easily, for he didn't seem to have any intention of losing them. It was almost as if he had accepted their company by now.

At two o'clock, working his way up a dry canyon, and now a good seven or eight hundred feet above the valley floor, he came upon a small spring and drank while they waited below him. Then he continued a short distance and waited for them, but they could hardly have lost him anyway, because the canyon walls were sheer at that point, and the climb ahead was steeper. After they had drunk, all three continued to climb in silence, and this went on for two more hours while the canyon became enveloped in shadow. The reflection of another sunset was creeping up the eastern wall when De Parter, after crawling around a rock that was at least fifty feet high, discovered that he was in a cul-de-sac, and faced around toward his pursuers. They stopped at once, and prepared for another conversation.

"Look," said De Parter, standing calmly before them, "Back in there, it's a trap. I can't go forward, and I'll be goddamned if I'll go back, so here I stay. I want to tell you to leave me alone, and if you try to take me out, I'll fight."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"We've got to see the trap," said the little man, and they stepped up and looked carefully around the great rock. At that moment they were less than five feet from De Parter, who watched them suspiciously, ready for any move to tackle him.

They were soon satisfied, for there the canyon ended, the walls leaning inward to form a partial cave were smooth, without a handhold anywhere.

Then the party of three was split, De Parter inside the "trap," and the pursuers on the outside, where they set up a perpetual watch that lasted for the next eighteen hours. Out of their pockets they took a big loaf of rye bread and packages of ham, cheese, and pickles.

"De Parter," said the small one, "Hey there, De Parter."

"What?"

"Want a sandwich?"

"No, and shut up! Remember now, *shut up!*"

"O.K., O.K.," said the small man, "Don't get sore."

In a low voice, he asked his companion, "Think this dope'll come out of it alive?"

"Don't matter much," replied the tall one, "He's cooked already."

After that, it was merely a matter of taking a cautious look around the rock every hour to see if there was any change in the poet, who was seen to be writing with great energy and intensity in a notebook, right on through the night, using first his flashlight, then, when the batteries were used up, the full moon that flooded the upper end of the canyon, his "room," with overwhelming brilliance. In the half-hour of true darkness after the moon had set and daylight had not yet come, he burned match after match, reaching into his pocket and scratching them on the rock in back of him. Through all this he wrote on, hardly stopping except to turn a page, or to stretch his arms and legs.

At eleven o'clock in the morning, the small man, taking his turn to look at the poet, heard him say in a hoarse voice, as if saying it aloud to guide his weary fingers, " . . . . and that's all," and saw him fall over in a heap, either to faint or to sleep. The watcher quickly called his companion, and they set about their job of carrying the wayward employee back to J.F., his Boss.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

4.

In this way was ended the first of two great flights by the poet, De Parter. When he awoke, it was to stare into the happy face of J.F., at whose house in Palm Springs he was convalescent for various kinds of debility incidental to the production of the greatest extant poem of the age, immediately published in a small volume entitled *The Transit Beam,* or *A Straight Voyage Between Two Perils.*

"Oh boy!" said J.F., "What a poem! They're saying there aren't twenty people alive today who can understand it!"

It was generally agreed, in the Athens of the Far West or at least in the highest society of the place, or to be more accurate, in that segment of society that counted the most, that J.F. had reached the ultimate pinnacle of prestige.

De Parter himself had no real conception of J.F.'s position, since poets are known to be careless about most kinds of social lines and compartments. It mattered most to him that the producer no longer had the aspect of the hideous ogre that had snapped at him across the desk, and had made him feel his isolation so keenly that he had rushed out of the presence of it in an access of fear and rage, not stopping until he had attained the farthest reaches of the desert, and had there exorcised the demon with a great surge of honest writing. J.F. was now once more the pleasant, tanned-faced man with glasses whom De Parter recognized as a friendly, if limited, protector.

But the ogre merely slumbered. Four months later, three weeks ago, with the nation heavily engaged in official war, and with everyone tensely waiting to be obliterated, De Parter saw the beast again, in the same way, but now decorated with horrid, flickering, sick shades of green and red, putrescent colors, and accompanied by machine-made sound effects of battle, imitating human groans and shrieks.

This time, in full second flight, the poet howled, "I'll never come back!", and repeated it as he ran through the outer offices, his voice diminishing with distance, and finally heard, dimly echoing in the great rotunda-lobby of the main studio building, at last a distorted, sobbing scream, *"I'll never come back!"*

"That's what you said the last time," softly replied the iron-nerved executive.

The small man inquired, "Should we follow, Boss?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

J. F. suddenly realized that he had lost interest in poetry, what with the war on, and so much important work to be done, and also that there isn't much fun of competition when you happen to own the only one of its kind, so he answered, "No, don't bother," thus finally giving up his equity in the affair.

With no pursuit, and nothing to measure his pace by, the last poet ran off into the desert, completely alone. His body, dehydrated, was found only yesterday by some soldiers who were engaged in scouting for a suitable place to set up hospitals for the survivors of destroyed Los Angeles to die in. De Parter had been writing with a stick on the incredibly flat salt plain, in letters a foot high, and seemed to have finished his work. Before anybody could copy it, if anybody could have been interested enough at the time, bulldozers had torn up the poem, which was approximately five hundred yards long, and all that remains is the report of the corporal-surveyor who stumbled over the body. He says the last line was *Brothers! We have come to this!*, but he can't remember the several others he saw.

In this way, the last poem of our last poet was written and destroyed. It is possible that something important was lost, something that might have given us some insight into the kind of civilization we now have to live in, but it is always safer and wiser to take the simpler explanation: that it was nothing more than the final, convulsive, incoherent scrawl of a man we know was *raving mad*.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Oliver Evans

JAMES'S AIR OF EVIL: "THE TURN OF THE SCREW"

It is exactly half a century since *The Turn of the Screw* first appeared on the literary scene. Its commercial success, which it is very likely that James himself did not foresee, was instantaneous; it soon proved, after *Daisy Miller,* to be his most popular book. Reading contemporary reviews of the new Jamesian "thriller," one becomes convinced that it was the sensational character of the subject which, more than anything else, appealed to most readers, and that this sensationalism, in turn, derived from the two most immediately obvious elements in the story: the author's preoccupation, first, with the theme of the supernatural; and, second, with that of perverse sexuality. The first of these themes was new with James; the second had previously (in such stories as "The Pupil" and "The Middle Years") only been obliquely hinted at.

If the popular success of *The Turn of the Screw* is thus easily to be accounted for, the reasons for its *aesthetic* success are by no means so immediately obvious, yet nothing can be plainer than the fact that the story is eminently successful in this sense also. Had its success been merely of one kind, critics would have let it go at that; they have not, however, been content to do so, and there are now almost as many interpretations of the story as there have been critics willing to venture them. On one point alone are they all (with the very prominent exception of Mr. T.S. Eliot, who does not definitely commit himself) in substantial agreement, and that is that *The Turn of the Screw* is one of James's finest novels. The disagreement, in other words, does not concern the fact, but the reasons therefor.

I have little hope, in the face of so much distinguished discord, of settling once and for all a problem so delicate and so complex.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I should like, however, to contribute to the general controversy by suggesting an interpretation which (all miraculously) has thus far, to my knowledge, never been put forth. And there is one thing which, before doing this, I *should* like to settle once and for all, and that is the question of the reality of the apparitions in the story.

It is commonly supposed that Miss Edna Kenton was the first to consider the possibility that the ghosts of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel do not really appear to the governess who tells the story, but are instead mere hallucinations, the creatures of her own disordered imagination. As a matter of fact, this possibility appears to have occurred previously to several readers, none of whom, however, was willing to entertain it very seriously or for very long. Only a few weeks after the book was published *The Critic* observed that "the heroine has nothing in the least substantial upon which to base her deep and startling cognitions. She perceives what is beyond all perception, and the reader who begins by questioning whether she is supposed to be sane ends by accepting her conditions and thrilling over the horrors they involve."

So far as I know, however, Miss Kenton was the first to go on record as *not* accepting the governess's conditions, and to state positively that the ghosts are nothing more than "exquisite dramatizations of her little personal mystery, figures for the ebb and flow of troubled thought within her mind." In her opinion James quite deliberately planned the story as a test of that attentiveness which he felt every author had a right to expect of his readers, and she offers in support of this theory James's reference to the story (in the definitive edition preface) as "a piece of ingenuity pure and simple, of cold, artistic calculation, an *amusette* to catch those not easily caught." She also stresses the fact that James nowhere *states* that the ghosts appear to anyone but the governess. On the strength, chiefly, of these two pieces of "evidence," she rather largely concludes: "Just a little wariness will suffice to disprove, with a single survey of the ground, the traditional, we might almost call it a *lazy* version of the tale. Not the children, but the little governess was hounded by the ghosts." It will be seen that, thus viewed, *The Turn of the Screw* becomes a sort of elaborate hoax, a trap for readers lazier and less wary than Miss Kenton.

This ingenious interpretation, which, as I shall later attempt

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to show, does so little justice to James's intention in writing the story and so narrowly delimits the reader's appreciation of it, attracted almost no attention when, in 1924, it appeared in *Arts* accompanied by an interesting set of illustrations by Charles Demuth. But ten years later Mr. Edmund Wilson published in *Hound and Horn* his now famous essay. "The Ambiguity of Henry James" (included, with some additions in *The Triple Thinkers,* 1938), in which he popularized and expanded this theory. In his opinion *The Turn of the Screw* is "simply a variation on one of James's familiar themes: the frustrated Anglo-Saxon spinster." He professes to discover specific Freudian meanings in the facts that the male ghost first appears on a tower, the female beside a lake; and that, on the occasion of the latter visitation, the child Flora is carrying (I quote from the story) "a small flat piece of wood, which happened to have in it a little hole that had evidently suggested to her the idea of sticking in another fragment that might figure as a mast and make the thing a boat."

Beyond pointing out such circumstances as these, Mr. Wilson did not really add substantially to Miss Kenton's interpretation. The Kenton-Wilson theory, at any rate, is now familiar to most Jamesians, and although it has elicited considerable random disapproval, I have nowhere seen it attacked point by point. An exception is Philip Rahv, but even he concedes, "Of course there is no doubt that the story may be read that way."

II

Both Miss Kenton and Mr. Wilson have conveniently ignored the letters, in which James made it perfectly clear that in *The Turn of the Screw* he was writing a tale of the *supernatural.* Its origin, as he declared in a letter to A.C. Benson (March 11, 1898) was a "small and gruesome *spectral* story" (italics mine) related to him by Archbishop Benson, grandfather of the educator. A few months later James wrote to Dr. Louis Waldstein that it was merely a "wanton little Tale" unworthy of such praise as the doctor had apparently given it. He added, however, that "the poet is always justified when he is not a humbug; always grateful to the justifying commentator," and continued: "My *bogey-tale* [italics mine] dealt with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

things so hideous that I felt that to save it at all I needed some infusion of beauty or prettiness, and the beauty of the pathetic was the only attainable—was indeed inevitable. But ah, the exposure indeed, the helpless plasticity of childhood that isn't dear or sacred to *somebody!* That *was* my little tragedy!" That was, indeed, the tragedy: the corruption of the two children by the living servants, and the possession (in the supernatural sense) of them afterwards by the ghosts of those same servants. In the light of this avowal, what happens to the "tragedy" if we think of the story simply as a careful trap, or as a mere case history of a governess subject to hallucinations?

In a letter to H. G. Wells (December 9, 1898), who had apparently objected that the governess's character did not receive sufficient delineation, James defended himself as follows:

> Of course I had, about my young woman, to take a very sharp line. The grotesque business I had to make her trace and present were, for me at least, a very difficult job, in which absolute lucidity and logic, a singleness of effect, were imperative. Therefore I had to rule out subjective complications of her own—play of tone, etc., and keep her impersonal save for the most obvious and indispensable little note of neatness, firmness and courage—without which she wouldn't have had her data.

Witness the phrase, "I had to rule out subjective complications of her own," and observe how incompatible it is with the notion that she is merely exposing her private neurosis in the story. Witness, too, how litle this picture of the governess coincides with Wilson's conception of her as a pronounced hysteric.

Writing to F.W.H. Myers (December 19, 1898) he is even more specific:

> The thing that, as I recall it, I most wanted not to fail of doing, under penalty of extreme platitude, was to give the impression of the communication to the children of the most infernal imaginable evil and danger—the condition, on their part, of being as *exposed* as we can humanly conceive children to be. This was my artistic knot to untie, to put any sense or logic into the thing, and if I had known any way of producing *more* the image of their contact and condition I should have been proportionately eager to resort to it.

Here James specifically states his conscious ambition, and I hope I do not need to point out that without the apparitions there is no evil, no danger, and no *exposure*. Finally there is the letter to his French trans-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lator, Auguste Monod (July 17, 1907). If James's intention had been as devious as the hoaxists and the nonapparitionists (if I may term them thus) would have us believe, surely he would have hinted as much to his translator; instead, he unambiguously refers to the book as a *"fantaisie absolue dans le genre de recherche du frisson."*

There is some evidence that James's opinion of the merits of *The Turn of the Screw* altered between the date of its first publication in 1898 and its appearance ten years later in the definitive edition: thus, in the above-mentioned letter to F.W.H. Myers, he refers to it as "a very mechanical matter, I honestly think—an inferior, a merely *pictorial* subject and rather a shameless pot-boiler," but in the preface, as Philip Rahv has commented, he gives it serious and lengthy treatment. It is possible, of course, that James was merely being overmodest in the Myers letter (the tone of many of his letters is self-deprecatory in this way, betraying their author's concern for "good taste"), but again it is possible that he did not immediately realize how consummately successful he had been in his attempt to communicate to the reader a sense of "most infernal imaginable evil and danger"—the poet, as he himself so well put it, being always grateful to the justifying commentator. Neither explanation supports the Kenton-Wilson view: as we have seen, there is no evil or danger without the apparitions; and if James had intended to conceal the point of the narrative as carefully as they claim—if, in other words, it was to be the subtlest of his stories in this sense—he would scarcely have referred to it as a potboiler.

The changes which James made for the definitive edition were of a purely verbal character and do not affect the plot in any way. However, the preface which he composed for the new edition is invaluable for the light which it throws on his intentions. Miss Kenton has not ignored this preface; she has done what is far worse: she has lifted one of its sentences out of its context, interpreted it in a very special kind of way, and then, claiming it as "evidence," has proceeded to construct upon it her very largest argument. In the case of a writer such as James, where context is almost all-important, this is particularly reprehensible. The sentence in question reads as follows: "I need scarcely add after this that it [*The Turn of the Screw*] is a piece of ingenuity pure and simple, of cold artistic calculation, an *amusette* to catch those not easily caught (the fun of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the capture of the merely witless being ever but small), the jaded, the disillusioned, the fastidious." Miss Kenton focuses on the first part of this sentence—very shrewdly for her purpose, for the adjectives "jaded," "disillusioned," and "fastidious" support a context she has deliberately chosen not to recognize. James has been speaking of the many difficulties which beset the writer of the fantastic, of how unsuccessful, in this age of sophistication, modern ghost stories have been in their attempt to "rouse the dear old sacred terror." The meaning of the sentence is simply that in *The Turn of the Screw*. James believed he had hit upon the perfect formula for rousing this type of terror—rousing it, moreover, in those the least susceptible, "the jaded, the disillusioned, the fastidious." What this formula is we shall see in a moment.

Mr. Wilson is guilty of much the same sort of thing. He interprets James's statement in the preface, that "She [the governess] has 'authority,' which is a good deal to have given her," as meaning that the governess, by reason of her "neurosis," was a dubious person to exert authority over children. But James is not using "authority" in this sense at all; he does not mean that the governess has authority where the *children* are concerned, but where the *reader* is, as will be obvious when one views the statement in its context. James has been defending himself against the accusation that the governess is insufficiently characterized (H.G. Wells, as we have noted, made the same charge) and concludes: "It constitutes no little of a character indeed, in such conditions, for a young person, as she says, 'privately bred,' that she is able to make her particular credible [*sic*] statement of such strange matters. She has 'authority,' which is a good deal to have given her, and I couldn't have arrived at so much had I clumsily tried for more." This last sentence, which we have seen the nonapparitionists quote (without benefit of context) to their own purpose, really offers the most convincing proof that they are mistaken; in it James is simply saying that we are to accept as authoritative the governess's account of what happens in *The Turn of the Screw*.

James goes on to tell exactly what his motives were in writing his "bogey-tale": "Good ghosts, speaking by book, make poor subjects, and it was clear that from the first my hovering prowling blighting presences, my pair of abnormal agents, would have to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

depart altogether from the rules. They would be agents in fact; there would be laid in them the dire duty of causing the situation to reek with the air of Evil." Finally he defines his formula for making the situation reek to capacity with the "air of Evil." Alive, the servants had performed sufficient *specific* harm in corrupting their little charges; what additional outrage could they now perform that would not be anticlimactic? The problem, as James was perfectly aware, was a difficult one; he solved it, and solved it successfully, by deliberate refuge to the general, the nonspecific—solved it, in other words, by simple *omission*: "Only make the reader's general vision of evil intense enough, I said to myself . . . and his own experience, his own sympathy (with the children) and horror (of their false friends) will supply him quite sufficiently with all the particulars. Make him *think* the evil, make him think it for himself, and you are released from weak specifications." One may well wonder how it is possible to read all this and believe that James intended the ghosts to be nothing more than mere hallucinations.

The prologue is equally unambiguous. A group of house guests are gathered about a fire on Christmas Eve. Someone has just told a story in which a small child is visited by an apparition. One of the guests, Douglas, then remarks that he knows of a similar case involving *two* children: "Nobody but me, till now, has ever heard. It's quite too horrible. It's beyond everything. Nothing at all that I know touches it." The others are naturally curious, and he tells them he will send at once to London for the story, which it appears has already been written down by the governess of the haunted children, who was an actual witness.

Observe that Douglas himself never implies for a moment that he doubts the governess's account. On the contrary, one of James's motives in writing the prologue is to provide her with a "character reference" so that we may listen to her with respect. Douglas, who knew her intimately, certainly did not think that she was emotionally unstable: " 'She was my sister's governess,' he quietly said. 'She was the most agreeable woman I've ever known in her position; she would have been worthy of any whatever.' " Had James's intention been to characterize her as an irresponsible neurotic, what could have been his motive in having *the only person who knew her,* and was therefore able to vouch for her character, speak in this fashion?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I come now to the story itself. Miss Kenton and Mr. Wilson make much of the fact that, in the second scene by the lake, Miss Jessel's ghost is visible to the governess but not to the housekeeper. This power (of appearing only to certain individuals) has been the privilege of ghosts throughout all literature; it is, indeed, one of their most traditional attributes. And James has his own reasons for making use of it in *The Turn of the Screw*: it constitutes a definite victory for the ghosts, thus sharpening the conflict between them and the governess for the "possession" of the children; and it adds an almost unbearable tension to the story. One could not, incidentally, wish for stronger evidence of the stability of the governess's personality than the fact that, although the housekeeper herself has seen nothing, she does not doubt that her friend has—a point which James, who certainly sees the necessity for it, drives home again and again.

The nonapparitionists have never satisfactorily explained the coincidence between the governess's description of the ghosts and the impression which the housekeeper has retained of the living servants; and they have been forced to account for the death of little Miles at the end by saying that the governess herself, in attempting to make him see what is not there, simply scares the life out of him—this in spite of James's last sentence, "We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, *dispossessed* [italics mine] had stopped."

They also have not accounted for the fact that the housekeeper testifies toward the end that little Flora is, indeed, bewitched. For not only does Mrs. Grose believe that the governess has seen what she herself was unable to see, but her subsequent session with the little girl convinces her that the latter is definitely possessed. Referring to the last dreadful scene by the lake, Mrs. Grose observes: "It has made her, every inch of her, quite old." (Previously the governess has told the housekeeper, "At such times she's not a child: she's an old, old woman.") I reproduce the following conversation between the two servants:

> "You mean that, since yesterday, you *have* seen—?"
> She shook her head with dignity. "I've *heard*—!"
> "Heard?"
> "From that child—horrors! There!" she sighed with tragic relief. "On my honour, Miss, she says things—!" But at this evocation she

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

broke down; she dropped, with a sudden sob, upon my sofa and, as I had seen her do before, gave way to all the grief of it.

It was in quite another manner that I, for my part, let myself go.

"Oh, thank God!"

She sprang up at this, drying her eyes with a groan. "Thank God?"

"It so justifies me!"

"It does that, Miss."

Mrs. Grose then goes on to say that the child has been abusing the governess in language which she "can't think wherever she must have picked up." But immediately she adds, "Well, perhaps I ought to also—since I've heard some of it before." She has heard it "before," of course, from Miss Jessel herself. Finally the governess asks her:

"Then, in spite of yesterday, you *believe?*"

"In such doings?" Her simple description of them required, in the light of her expression, to be carried no further, and she gave me the whole thing as she had never done:

"I believe."

Should there, after all this, remain any doubt in the reader's mind as to the reality of the apparitions, let him now glance back at the beginning of the story, *before* Peter Quint's ghost first appears. The governess has just arrived at Bly, knowing nothing of her unhappy predecessors. Immediately she senses that Mrs. Grose is strangely glad to see her: "I perceived within half an hour that she was so glad—stout, simple, plain, clean, wholesome woman—as to be positively on her guard against showing it too much. I wondered even then a little why she should not wish to show it . . ." It is several times hinted, at the first of the story, that the housekeeper is uneasy, that she is trying to conceal a suspicion that everything is not as it should be—a suspicion which she could only have arrived at independently, since the governess has barely arrived.

The governess, who has not even met the children yet, spends a rather uneasy first night: "There had been moments when I believe I recognized, faint and far, the cry of a child; there had been another when I found myself just consciously starting as at the passage, before my door, of a light footstep." From the very beginning James spares no pains in informing us that supernatural forces are at work within the house: the housekeeper is already aware of them,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and the governess becomes aware long before she could have any reason to invent them.

III

I hope I have not overlabored my point here. I thought the risk worth running, at any rate, since I am convinced that it is impossible to fully appreciate *The Turn of the Screw* unless one accepts the reality of the apparitions.

Mr. Wilson remarks that *The Turn of the Screw,* on any other hypothesis than the one he proposes, would be "the only thing James ever wrote which did not have some more or less serious point." But to view the novel as an implied case history, a mere clinical record, is to deprive the reader of the peculiar sense of horror which it was James's ambition to arouse in him. Take, for example, the scene where little Miles, exerting all his charms, distracts the governess with his precocity at the piano, while his sister steals off to consort with Miss Jessel's evil shade. Suddenly the governess remembers: "Where, all this time, was little Flora? When I put the question to Miles he played on a minute without answering, and then could only say, 'Why, my dear, how do *I* know?'—breaking moreover into a happy laugh which, immediately after, as if it were a vocal accompaniment, he prolonged into incoherent, extravagant song." The whole infernal effectiveness of this scene (and it is immensely effective) resides in the fact that the little concert has been nothing more than a careful ruse on the children's part to lure the governess into temporarily forgetting her responsibility and relaxing her vigilance.

Or take the eerie scene just before this, in which the governess is pleading with Miles to confess his domination by the evil ghost of Peter Quint: " 'Dear little Miles, I just want you to help me to save you!' But I knew in a moment after this that I had gone too far. The answer to my appeal was instantaneous, but it came in the form of an extraordinary blast and chill, a gust of frozen air and a shake of the room as great as if, in the wild wind, the casement had crashed in." The child shrieks ("a note either of jubilation or of terror") and the candle goes out:

"Why, the candle's out!" I cried.
"It was I who blew it, dear!" said little Miles.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Observe how immeasurably the effect of horror here is heightened by our conviction that the child is in league with those supernatural forces which, momentarily, and doubtless of his own volition, have become translated into natural ones.

I tend to agree with the late Ford Madox Ford when he says: "If you will take *The Turn of the Screw,* with its apparent digressions, its speculations, its twists and its turns, you will see that the real interest centres round the proposition: 'Is the narrator right or wrong in thinking that if the little boy can only disburden himself of a full confession, he will be saved for ever from the evil ascendancy of Peter Quint?' " By "real" interest Ford here means narrative interest, and on the subject of James's narrative technique Ford was particularly well informed. Without the possession theme, which necessitates the reality of the ghosts, there is simply no conflict, no drama, no *story.* That James was thoroughly conscious of this is proved by the artistry with which he focuses on those details which sharpen the conflict and thus intensify the drama of the situation. Take for example the above-mentioned bedroom scene, and note how skillfully it is suggested to the reader (always through the medium of the governess, to whom the impressions occur in appropriate images) that little Miles is *sick,* spiritually sick: "His clear, listening face, framed in its smooth whiteness, made him for the moment as appealing as some wistful patient in a children's hospital; and I would have given, as the resemblance came to me, all I possessed on earth to be the nurse or the sister of charity who might have helped to cure him."

I agree also with Mr. Philip Rahv in his opinion that the sense of *evil* which James sought to communicate is to be conceived of largely in sexual terms. The horror of the situation is heightened, moreover, by the fact that the boy has been corrupted by the male servant; the girl, by the female. Peter Quint's abnormality is hinted at ("There had been matters in his life . . . secret disorders, vices more than half suspected"), and Mrs. Grose says in so many words that he had been "much too free" with little Miles, who had "gone off with the fellow, and spent hours with him." Then there is the unambiguous dialogue between the governess and Mrs. Grose:

"At all events, while he was with the man—"
"Miss Flora was with the woman. It suited them all!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Neither Ford's interpretation nor Mr. Rahv's is sufficient, however, to account for the really uncanny effectiveness of *The Turn of the Screw*. I feel that both are valid, and that they perhaps sufficiently explain the book's contemporary popularity; but it seems to me that these two elements (supernatural possession and sexual impropriety) are really secondary reasons, surface involvements of a theme at once more comprehensive, more fundamental, and more profound: the theme, that is, of appearance versus reality.

This theme, apparently not sufficiently serious for Mr. Wilson, is as old as philosophy itself. An extension of it, on the ethical plane, is the theme of good versus evil, and in fact some of the more perceptive contemporary reviewers of the book discovered this meaning in it. But in James the ethical conflict is not presented in a straightforward manner, as it is, say, in Blake (where a child is always a child, a lamb always a lamb, and both are always innocent), but with complication and irony. In *The Turn of the Screw,* with devastating effect, the lambs are not lambs at all, but tigers; the children are not really children, but, as Mrs. Grose perceives in the end, are as old as evil itself.

The problem of appearance versus reality, which to my mind constitutes the primary theme of the story, James logically expresses in the form of a paradox. Whether consciously or intuitively, he realized the artistic importance of selecting a situation wherein the *apparent* should be innocuous, and the *real* overwhelming in its horror. The horror of the real would, indeed, be in exact proportion to the charm of the apparent—which is why James makes his children the very personification of youthful beauty and innocence, and provides for them such an idyllic setting. Hawthorne was preoccupied with the same paradox; Wilde expressed it, though with infinitely less ingenuity than James, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray;* and it was to become almost an obsession with Pirandello. James himself had treated it earlier, and much less grimly, in "The Liar"; and it is interesting to note that in the definitive edition he included *The Turn of the Screw,* not in the same volume with *Covering End* (as these two had first been issued under the title of *The Two Magics*) or "The Jolly Corner" (another "ghost" story), but with "The Liar."

If one accepts this interpretation of the story, it is interesting

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to observe how skillfully James goes about the process of constructing his paradox. Again and again it is emphasized to the reader that the beauty of these children (like that of Dorian Gray) is a *lie*. At the very beginning it is suggested that Miles's appearance belies the suspicion which the governess (who has not yet seen him) is beginning to form concerning the reasons for his expulsion from school. "See him, Miss, first," Mrs. Grose tells her. "*Then* believe it!" When the governess does see him, it is "in the great glow of freshness, the same positive fragrance of purity, in which I had, from the first moment, seen his little sister." She is struck, not only by his beauty, but by something else too: "something divine that I have never found to the same degree in any child—his indescribable little air of knowing nothing in the world but love." This initial impression, terrible in its irony, is confirmed and reinforced by many later ones. And somehow the "rose flush of his innocence" is never so intense as when he is most actively engaged in positive evil.

I have no illusions that this interpretation of *The Turn of the Screw* exhausts the story's meanings. It does not exclude other interpretations; it has the virtue of extreme inclusiveness, though I fear there is no room in it for either Miss Kenton or Mr. Wilson. I think it does better justice to James's intention than certain narrower notions and that it permits a wider and deeper appreciation of the novel than any of these. As Mr. Rahv says, in James we are always justified in assuming a maximum of intention: the task of the "justifying commentator," in the case of a book like *The Turn of the Screw,* is indeed endless.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Stephen Spender

THE LIFE OF LITERATURE*

Now when I recall the face of Virginia Woolf it seems to me that there was something about the tensions of the muscles over the fine bones of the skull which was like an exquisite instrument finely strung. And it was as though stretched over these strings there was the very fine ivory skin. There in that beautiful taut face, the greyish eyes had a sometimes limpid, sometimes wandering, sometimes laughing, distractedness.

Long before I met Virginia Woolf, I had been told by Vita Sackville West that she was the most wonderful person in the world to go with on an excursion, to France, to Hampstead Heath, to the London Zoo, and that part of the privilege of knowing her was to receive letters written in a hand which had something of the cursiveness of an early type (1502) of Aldus, but which femininity gave a sensitivity lacking in the hands of more deliberate penmen, such as Eric Gill and Edmund Blunden.

Sometimes I dined with Leonard and Virginia Woolf at their house in Tavistock Square. They lived in half of this house, the lower half being occupied by the offices of their publishing firm, the Hogarth Press. Their drawing room was a large tall square shaped pleasant room ornamented with decorations by Vanessa Bell, the sister of Virginia. This room was a little austere, but what surprised more than this was its spaciousness, easiness and sense of style.

When her guests arrived, Virginia would be perhaps a little nervous, preoccupied with serving out the drinks. Her handshake and her smile of welcome would be a little distraught. Then when we had gone upstairs as we sat down to dinner, she would say to William Plomer and me (we were neighbors in Maida Vale and were often invited out together): "If you and Stephen insist on writing about Bloomsbury, I shall start an attack on the Maida Vale Group." "Really," Plomer said, raising his

* This is the fourth and closing part of a chapter from an autobiographical work in progress.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

eyebrows and laughing, "I'm not aware of having written about Bloomsbury, but you know one has to write such a lot these days. . . . " "Well, then, if it's not you, it's Stephen." "Oh, Stephen! How like him. Still, I can imagine nothing more charming than an essay by you, Virginia, about Maida Vale." In some such way, William would tease her back, and the rather edgy conversation would change. She would talk then about writing, say suddenly: "How do you write, William?" "How do I write?" "Yes. What do you do when you write? Do you look out of the window? Do you write while you are walking in the street? Do you cross out a lot? Do you smoke when you're writing? Do you start by thinking of one line?" She had a technique of cross-questioning like this, and would cross-question everyone, charwomen, bus drivers, newly married girls, ladies in waiting. . . .

When Plomer and I had both been questioned, we would ask her about her writing. And perhaps she would come out with something like this: "I don't think there's any form in which the novel has to be written. My idea is to make use of every form and bring it within a unity which is a novel. There's no reason why a novel shouldn't be written partly in poetry, partly in prose, and with scenes in it like scenes in a play. Before I die, I would like to write a novel which was a fusion of poetry and dialogue as in a play. I would like to experiment with every form that I can bring into the novel."

Then after dinner we would go down to the drawing room again, and Virginia would smoke a cheroot. The conversation would pass from literature to gossip about personalities, quite possibly to Hugh Walpole the best-selling novelist of whom she was fond but whose character, made up of a combination of impenetrable complacency thickly overlaying unfathomable uneasiness (the complacency and the uneasiness existing in exactly equal proportions), fascinated Virginia. She was never tired of performing the miracle, only possible to her, of pricking through the complacency to the uneasiness. By her cross questioning methods she extracted from him frightful confessions, the comparative sales of his novels and those of J. B. Priestley, the awful story of how he had "made" J. B. Priestley and then been overwhelmed by his success, the still more awful story of how he had sat up all night reading Somerset Maugham's *Cakes and Ale* and read the most cruel dissection of his own career in the portrait of the best-selling novelist, and then sat down and written a review saying that it was the best novel of the year, the make of Hugh's car and its speed and performance, the fact that his chauffeur had a striking resemblance to Hugh, the exact weight of the paper being stored in a warehouse by his publisher to print the novel which Hugh

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was now writing, and so on. All this information and a great deal more Virginia in her merciless way extracted, and then laid before her friends, discussing it with much sympathy, but from every angle, sometimes in the presence of the victim. She had a passionate social curiosity about the "high" the "middle" and the "low" (I am sure these distinctions of class existed sharply in her mind). The British Royal Family was a subject of intense interest for her, partly, I think because as an institution it was a supreme and fascinating example of male pretension which she saw, gold-brocaded, strutting and stiff in her mind's picture of public life. She could describe a dinner party where, as a young girl, she sat next to Winston Churchill then (for the first time) First Lord of the Admiralty and dressed in court dress, as though she were describing the behavior of curious sea monsters seen through the glass window of an aquarium. She could tell stories about Dame Ethyl Smythe, the very eccentric British composer, until the tears ran down her cheeks. One of these concerned a dinner party, given by the Woolfs in the country, to which Dame Ethyl came. Dame Ethyl (who must have been about seventy at the time) bicycled the twenty miles from the village where she lived to the Woolfs' house, dressed in her bicycling costume of tough tweed. About two miles from her destination, she decided that perhaps she was not suitably dressed for a dinner party. There was little she could do to remedy the situation, but she decided that an appropriate gesture would be to buy corsets to straighten up her figure, sagging and sweating rather after the miles up and down hill of Sussex roads. Accordingly, she went into a village shop and demanded in her military voice some corsets. They had none. Very distressed she looked round the shop and then suddenly sighted a bird cage, which, without explanation she purchased. About twenty minutes later, Virginia went out into her garden to search for Dame Ethyl who was by now rather late, to find her in a state of undress in the shrubbery, struggling with a bird cage which she was shaping into corsets and stuffing under her blouse.

There was an admirable detachment about Virginia Woolf. She could talk about her own past with an objectivity which was quite unambiguous. She was simply interested in the story that she was telling, and the fact that she was involved in it was irrelevant. For example, one evening she was talking about Rupert Brooke, and she said: "He was very keen on upholding the 'free life.' One day he said: 'let's go swimming without any clothes on.'" "And did you, Virginia?" someone asked. "Of course, I did," she answered on a note of complete detachment, and then she added thoughtfully: "Lytton always said that Rupert had bandy legs. But I don't think that was so." One day she talked

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

about someone who was mad, and with such clear objectivity that one was not embarrassed by the recollection that she had twice been insane herself.

Virginia seemed to hate her dinner parties to come to an end and sometimes they would go on until two in the morning. She always gave an impression of great happiness on these occasions. However, sometimes she could be cold, snubbing and frightening, in the manner of extremely sensitive people. Once I happened to find myself seated next to her in a concert of three Posthumous Quartets of Beethoven. She looked at me a little coldly, said nothing and turned away. It was obvious that she wished to listen to the concert and not speak to me, so I did not say a word to her either during or after the music. A day later she telephoned inviting me to dine. If I had tried to make conversation she might have rebuffed me in the way of frightened people, asking sharply: "What do you want?" or "Who are you?" while looking at me with eyes that scarcely saw.

As remarkable as Virginia was Leonard Woolf her husband, who wrote some of the best modern short stories and illuminating studies of modern history, was an important worker in the Labor Movement, an authority on International Relations, founded his publishing firm on the winnings of a prize in the Calcutta Sweepstake, and who by his love, patience and tact created the conditions which made possible Virginia's great creative work. Towards the end of her life, I used to see Virginia alone more often than previously. Once she said: "My marriage with Leonard is the most wonderful thing in my life. It is always new. I have been married to him (twenty?) years and yet whenever he comes into a room I haven't the faintest idea what he is going to say." These two, with their devotion, their loyal sense of friendship, had something Roman about them, and the death of Virginia was also Roman. Feeling the approach of the mental illness from which she had already suffered twice, she went to a small river in the neighborhood of her house in Sussex, filled her pockets with stones and threw herself into the stream.

These brief sketches are written only for the purpose of showing that there was a life, a life of houses, drawing rooms, and conversation, which was the background of literature in England after the First World War. From a certain point of view what I have said may be too much and distract from the main purpose of this record of personal history with its lessons of mistakes and losses. From another point of view I have not written enough to give a complete idea of the richness and completeness of this life. For example, I have said very little of the main

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

personalities, and nothing of many other personalities in this life. An omission is not to have attempted to describe the very sincere, admirable and complex personality of E. M. Forster. Again, I have said almost nothing of the drawing room, scented with hundreds of oranges into which cloves had been stuck, placed in bowls, of Lady Ottoline Morrell or of the personality of the hostess herself, an old lady at this time, dressed still as an eighteenth-century shepherdess receiving celebrities like the Huxleys, Bertrand Russell, W. B. Yeats, at her famous "Thursday afternoons." But I must avoid describing all this, at the risk of annoying those I have not mentioned even more than those I have. The point to make is that all this existed, just as a point is that Virginia Woolf could be extremely amusing.

If I were to go on, I would be tempted to describe the occasion when W. B. Yeats sat on a sofa in Lady Ottoline's drawing room, explaining to Virginia Woolf the story, the philosophy and the connection with ideas of relativity in modern science, and with spiritualist research, of her novel *The Waves*—a book which, he wound up an hour's discourse by saying, he one day intended to read. But the final point to make is that all this has passed away, passed away, and that even while I was observing it as the latest comer on its stage, it was crumbling under my eyes. I lived in it while thinking that already it belonged to the past.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MUSIC CHRONICLE

TWO FILM SCORES

Music in the concert hall is usually heard, but frequently not felt; music with a film is rarely heard and always felt. This gives the film composer opportunity to project his ideas while the audience isn't listening, so to speak, and easily brushing past aural prejudices engendered by conscious perception, he makes his appeal directly to the feelings on an almost psychological level. An elementary kind of appeal, to be sure, yet quite basic in the nature of art. Owing to its functional value and large audience potential, in a society where new music has had neither function nor audience, film music should provide a fertile field for creation, and has been receiving growing emphasis. Lavish but hackneyed in the Hollywood film, its artistic importance in the documentary has reached a point where, in sponsoring *Louisiana Story,* Standard Oil devoted a good portion of its budget to the procuring of two of America's most successful music makers—Virgil Thomson and the Philadelphia Orchestra.

My impression of R. J. Flaherty's *Louisiana Story,* hailed by both film and music critics as a significant advance in the purposeful combination of the two arts, was that its effect is unclear and disjointed. Its two themes never seem to come to fruition, and are joined in a highly contrived fashion by over arty cutting, and a flimsy, meaningless story which has no place in a documentary. Willard Van Dyke's postulation that a documentary by its very nature involves delineation of a problem may be purely arbitrary, but in this film's scrupulous avoidance of all problems, the relationships among boy, bayou, and oil derrick emerge as purely idyllic. This may be quite pleasing to the film's sponsor, but as art its effect is amorphous.

Virgil Thomson's suave music becomes party to the film's disjointedness in that it proceeds largely in short, regular phrases, and steers the same idyllic path emotionally, which fails to bring sense to the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

film's somewhat confusing cutting. Most rewarding are the frightening suspense of the alligator hunt—remarkably achieved without recourse to Hollywood cliché—and the oil derrick music, which, written in a twelve-tone but *consonant* technique (unacceptable to some Schoenberg purists), is singularly evocative of the derrick's inhuman and awesome power. However, the use of Cajun folk tunes in connection with the boy and the bayou is wholly out of place, for these melodies, while charming in themselves and deftly handled, invoke only the happiness of conviviality. They not only leave untouched but do violence to the film's more poignant possibilities, involving far more profound feelings in the boy's happiness found in solitude and identity with his wild but beautiful surroundings.

In quite another world is Uday Shankar's *Kalpana.** The purpose of the film is to present Shankar's life's work as dancer, teacher, and choreographer, and the music, while serving as a function of the dance, is not only intrinsic to the film, but wholly expressive and fascinating in its own right. Hindu music is largely improvisation upon traditional melodic patterns (the *raga*), which can go on at any length so long as it remains within the prescribed limits of the particular *raga*. This is quite at variance with our Western notions of art, which still cling firmly to the Aristotelian principle of a beginning, middle, and end, and it is just this principle that the score's creator, Shirali, has brought to his native Hindu music. Thus, without adulteration by extrinsic elements, a "primitive" (though highly developed and complex) music is made to emerge as an integrated art-form which might easily be accepted in our culture as "modern" and "contemporary" were we not aware of its origin. Yet when we consider that this music has undergone no essential change in some thousand years, it gives pause to our perhaps too ready acceptance of the necessarily evolutionary nature of art.

The beautiful Hindu melodies, built upon various scales which no longer sound foreign to the modern ear, are of course all monodic (though ostinato is sometimes strikingly used), and make us mindful of the power and completeness of expression in a well-wrought melodic line unaided by harmony. Two hours of monody might well prove less than fully satisfying to us whose music has reached its greatest complexity on a harmonic level, but I would infinitely prefer it to two hours of the overdeveloped harmonic structure to which we have recently become accustomed. Rhythmically, however, the modern ear finds itself on entirely

* *Kalpana* has had a few screenings sponsored by the East and West Association. It is hoped that after editing and titling it can be released for public distribution, but plans are still indefinite.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

familiar ground which leaves nothing to be desired, for it is on this level that Hindu music has reached its highest maturity. Conceived not in two's and three's, but in groups measuring up to thirty beats, it moves with consummate ease from simple regular pulses to the most extreme intricacies of polyrhythmic music. Unnotated, it achieves an infectiousness too frequently absent in Western music, where emphasis has become increasingly diverted from what the ear hears to what the eye sees.

Yet even harmonically there is considerable interest, for the many gongs and percussion instruments have definite pitches which impose striking polytonal and atonal effects upon the scale line. And in the field of imitative sound, Shirali rivals our most skillful orchestrators in an amazing factory sequence, where sounds of machinery are produced most convincingly and excitingly with instruments and voices, aided only by amplification. So complete is the illusion that one listens twice before detecting the large plucked instruments, the tinkling water cups, or even men's voices. Shankar tells me that they do not consider this music, but only sound effect; yet its well conceived rhythmic organization would seem to put it on a somewhat higher plane.

So far as the dancing goes, one is struck by the immediacy of its emotional appeal and its complete cognibility in the realm of feeling, quite apart from its meaning as symbolic gesture. I have the feeling that in its advanced development of form and expression, dancing is to the Orient what music is to the Occident, and would even compare Shankar's art with the music of our so-called "classic" period; in its building on a number of basic forms, its immediacy of perception, the ease with which it moves through any number of moods, and finally in the profound joy of creation which it expresses. It is perhaps this wonderful joy that attracts me to Shankar's dancing (and to classical music) as much as anything, for it is an element painfully lacking in contemporary Western art. It is useless to inveigh against, or prescribe for, the artist, who is subject to higher laws of social and artistic evolution as well as to laws of individual creativity. But it is quite conceivable that the re-appearance of this joy in artistic creation, without counterpart in any other emotion, will be a sign that art has at last freed itself from the dilemma into which it was plunged at the turn of the century.

Harold Brown

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BOOKS

POET AND MYSTIFIER

YEATS: THE MAN AND THE MASKS. By Richard Ellmann. Macmillan. $5.00.

Let us admit that few writers of our time offer more handicaps to the biographer than Yeats. For fifty years he was a public figure as familiar to every educated reader in the English-speaking world as any statesman or general. But more than that he was a public figure with comparatively few reticences of the usual kind. There are the successive volumes of the *Autobiography,* with their detailed family history, intimate records of childhood and youth, self-analyses. What is here not actually divulged about the deeper conflicts of his personality can usually be read between the lines. And of course there is the poetry itself, especially that written during his final phase, certainly as "personal" poetry, in what is sometimes considered the bad sense of the word, as any that we have known. All poetry is inevitably personal; but few poets in English since Byron (Whitman, Lawrence, perhaps) have grounded their *subjects* so frankly on actual personal experiences, creating a mythology out of friendships, love relationships, even the physiological changes of the body. The result of all this is our feeling that we know so much about his life and temperament as to render the labor of his biographers largely superfluous. This does not happen to be true, for example, for Joyce, Valéry, or Eliot.

On the next to last page of his book Mr. Ellmann says of Yeats, "If he puts on a mask, he informs the world and eventually justifies himself by finding that everyone has done likewise. In this he is the opposite of Whitman who practiced the utmost concealment while he pretended to be outspoken. Yeats cannot keep a secret. He is never an individualist like Blake, developing by himself and to a considerable extent for himself; he has always an audience in mind, writes to be understood, and wants approbation." Why, we are immediately tempted to inquire, if Yeats himself is continually doffing his mask, write a book about him with the sub-title "The Man and the Masks"? Why run the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

risk of supplying another tiresome recital of the main circumstances of his life like those by Joseph Hone and Louis MacNeice? The answer is provided for us on the jacket: Mr. Ellmann had access to about 50,000 pages of material which Yeats left behind him at his death. Although let down by false expectations of this sort in the past, one had hopes that this time the new biographer would justify his claims upon our attention. Unfortunately, this is not the case. In quantity the passages from the unpublished manuscripts occupy only a small portion of the book as a whole. Moreover, to the regret of this reviewer at least, they throw no new light on Yeats either as man or artist. In some instances they support or expand impressions that we have already had, but never compel us to revise them. We would be much more grateful if Mr. Ellmann had presented us with a patiently edited selection from the manuscripts themselves and left the rest to us.

Instead, Mr. Ellmann has written a solid, generally intelligent and unpretentious book which will undoubtedly be useful to younger students of modern literature. For others it contains too many familiar materials —Yeats's ventures into theosophy and spiritualism and his associations with the Irish literary movement—to prove exciting. Although on the whole well documented, it fails in making certain discriminations. Yeats is casually referred to as a Celt, although neither by inheritance or temperament was Yeats a Celt in the sense that Joyce or O'Casey are Celts. Throughout there is much talk of Yeats's various "tensions"; but certainly one of the greatest of these was between his loyalty to the small Protestant Anglo-Irish gentry out of which he came and the lifelong fascination exerted upon him by the folklore and customs of the Celtic and preponderantly Catholic native population. Yeats was Irish by conversion rather than by birthright and suffered from the inner discomfiture of all converts. In dealing with Yeats's relationship with Maud Gonne, Mr. Ellmann reveals a certain lack of skepticism, a tendency to take the poet too much at his own word. This is a delicate enough matter, to be sure, since it concerns persons still living. But indeed like everything else in his career Yeats's great love affair was conducted on a public scale. It was just possibly a necessary ingredient in the campaign of self-dramatization by which he built up his legend. It was appropriate that the first poet of his country (who was also one of its most handsome men) should come to grief at the hands of the woman reputed to be its most beautiful. Like Stendhal's Fabrizio he may have been "in love with love," or with the image of himself in a classical tragic situation. In any case, the situation was a great help to the poetry.

In his final chapter Mr. Ellmann manages to tie himself up in a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

great many pretty knots, like Edmund Wilson and R. P. Blackmur before him, over the problem of belief and symbolism in Yeats's verse. It would be so much simpler if we could all come to agree that Yeats *was* from first to last what Baudelaire called a *mystificateur*. In this he was perverse, irrational and dishonest: it is a matter for the moralist. We can condone such an attitude only as the result of an unfortunate psychological condition—from which, incidentally, most of the important European poets of the past hundred years have also suffered. We must keep in mind the excessive strain upon the poet of sustaining a belief in the superiority of imaginative symbols in an unimaginative culture. The attitude of mystification becomes an almost necessary self-protective armor. Despite his occasional assertions of his belief in their living actuality, Yeats's fairies, spooks and reincarned beings are for us today no more than what his father, in writing about Blake, called part of "the machinery of poetry." And the poetry remains.

William Troy

THE UNRECONSTRUCTED ALLEN TATE

ON THE LIMITS OF POETRY. By Allen Tate. Swallow Press & William Morrow. $4.00.

This book, Allen Tate explains, was put together from three earlier books which collected essays written over a period of twenty years. The subjects of the essays now included are individual poets, problems of poetics or criticism, and wider questions of religion, provincialism and tradition. In bulk and range, this new volume fairly represents, then, Allen Tate's product as an active critic.

We seem almost called upon to make a summary judgment. What does Allen Tate stand for? Not in terms of a list of preferences from occasional reviews, or of isolated opinions from this or that analytic essay, but what over-all, what that ties together his works of twenty years into one work? Though I believe Tate to be mistaken in many of his theoretical views, even a little silly in some of them, and though I do not share all of his literary tastes, I would nevertheless answer this question: he stands, simply, for the best. I have no sympathy with his myth of the Confederacy, but perhaps he has somewhat infected me with it: I find that I want to designate as "honorable" this twenty years' record. In his critical writings, Tate has never been disloyal to himself, to his chosen code and values. In our time and place, this

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

rigor is unusual enough when it keeps firm against the obvious beckons of money, jobs, and public applause. It is even rarer when, in surplus, it does not yield to the shifting fads and formulas that can so persuasively be substituted for the genuine article of independent criticism. Small wonder, then, if this stiff attitude is braced here and there with pigheadedness.

There is little "development" in these essays; if the year of first publication were not printed, it would be difficult to date them. In this also Tate contrasts with most of his contemporaries, whose critical life divides into easily recognizable "periods": Eliotism, Stalinism, Existentialism, Organicism, Americanism, Journalism, and the others. Tate, a generation ago, got hold of a car that seemed to him good for his purposes; and he decided, evidently, to keep it repaired and going rather than to make the customary trade-ins. Ironically enough, Tate's resolute unfashionableness has not altogether prevented fashion, on one of its fronts at least, from overtaking him. The academic world, from universities to the Modern Language Association, began several years ago to appoint Tate, and others (like Brooks, Ransom, Warren) who may loosely be grouped with him, as Professors, Heads of Departments, and featured speakers. This twist of the cycle holds some embarrassment for prophets who have been so harsh to the Philistines. "I am told," Tate remarks in his present preface, "that the 'school' of critics of which I have been said somewhat perplexingly to be a member is no longer a minority. If this be true, I am not sure that it is good for me or for other members of the school, whoever they are; but I think it scarcely true."

Like a good captain, Tate early chose his enemy. He defines, or rather names him, as "positivism." The term is not used in the special and narrow sense which is given to it by technical philosophy, but more loosely, to refer to a rather mixed corps: pragmatism, empiricism, naturalism, mechanism, technologism, scientism, historicism—in sum perhaps we should say, "the modern spirit." Positivism, Mr. Tate's positivism, he judges to be a heretical demi-religion which is essentially characterized, in all of its varied manifestations, by its reduction of reality and experience to the service of the practical will. Implicit in this reduction is a denial of objective "cognition," and an inability to justify the existence of poetry. In the history of poetry and of poetic criticism, the inner spirit of positivism is latent in the Spenserian kind of allegorizing or in Tennyson's "crude optimism" or in Arnold's moral criterion, as well as overt in I. A. Richards' instruction to poetry to order our impulses. By an inversion, positivism dominates the romantic movement. "The pure scientific

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

spirit I shall call here . . . . a positive Platonism, a cheerful confidence in the limitless power of man to impose practical abstractions upon his experience. Romantic irony is a negative Platonism, a self-pitying disillusionment with the positive optimism of the other program: the romantic tries to build up a set of fictitious 'explanations,' by means of rhetoric. . . . "

Positivism cannot understand (nor its spirit produce) genuine poetry, because poetry is the creation, not of the practical will, but of the imagination. Poetry presents, not for action, but for "knowledge," "the imaginative whole of life," which "is wholeness of vision at a particular moment of experience; it yields us the quality of experience." Poetry's distinction "is its complete knowledge, the full body of experience that it offers us." "When the will and its formulas are put back into an implicit relation with the whole of our experience, we get the true knowledge which is poetry. It is the kind of knowledge which is really essential to the world, the true content of its phenomena, that which is subject to no change, and therefore is known with equal truth for all time." Verbally, then, Tate's doctrine is certainly the extreme contrary of that of positivism (in the technical sense), which restricts "knowledge" to explicit statements capable of operational interpretation.

Approaching somewhat differently, Tate finds a genuine poem to be an indissoluble fusion of idea, words, emotion, rhythm, image. Each element is exactly adequate to every other; there is neither excess nor defect. This is the ideal, seldom reached. When it is, Tate recognizes that there is very little that criticism can do, other than to "remove obstacles" from recognition. "This integral character of the work of art forever resists practical formulation." "The quality of poetic vision . . . . is not susceptible of logical demonstration. We may prepare our minds for its reception by the logical elimination of error. . . . Let us not argue about it. It is here for those who have eyes to see." When, however, the poetry fails, when the idea is not adequately grounded in the words, the emotion not bodied in the image, or any other disproportion exists among the elements, then analytic criticism can expose the causes of failure. Probably the best passages in Tate's criticism are those where, with a tact and sensibility that are both acute and convincing, he undertakes such exposures. By showing us just where Keats or Hardy or Shelley or Cowley or Crane or Robinson have gone wrong, he trains us also in sensing more keenly the right.

The content of Tate's theory of poetry is not quite so different as he imagines from that of the "positivists." They, too, seek to distinguish poetry from science; and their laborious explorations into "aesthetic

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

signs," "contextual" or "reflexive" symbols, "iconic signs," etc. are an effort to describe within the limits of their terminology very much the same reality which Tate tries to point to with his. The big gulf between Tate and his enemy is rhetorical and, I think, moral. He detests their language: and let us admit that in its application to art the positivist language is usually dreary and inappropriate—inappropriate because it gives a false seeming of scientific precision in a field where a small drop of insight and sensibility is worth more than the entire pool of "laboratory knowledge" that has so far been stored. Tate rejects even more flatly the moral judgments and values which are usually associated with this language in the persons of the positivists. They, or most of them, are not seriously interested in poetry, and Tate is. They, or many of them, believe that the progressive application of scientific method is the way of salvation. Tate does not.

Tate's formalist aesthetics (for it is an aesthetics, in spite of his disavowal) is in a number of ways rather close to Kant's. Kant's "pleasure in the sensuous presentation of an object," apart from "the idea of the existence of the object" and from all interest or desire, his "form of purposiveness without the idea of purpose," and his other paradoxes can be related without too much strain to Tate's conception of the poetic attitude and the poetic product. And Tate's account runs into the same important trouble: it is hard to get from it an objective evaluation of "significance," of importance.

If a poem is "genuine," and therefore "complete," if it is an integral fusion of its elements, each adequate to all the rest, then presumably it is "perfect," unique, and thus incommensurable with every other genuine poem, which is also perfect and unique. Comparative judgments can be made only between a genuine (that is, perfect) poem, and other works which to one or another degree are incomplete, imperfect, not fused—that is, which fail in one or more respects to *be* poems.

But what if the elements are themselves inferior? What if the idea is banal or second-rate, or the emotion shallow (or even vicious), and yet the words and images and rhythm altogether adequate, and wholly fused with the second-rate idea or the shallow emotion? On what objective basis can Tate (or Kant before him) rate such a poem as less than genuine (perfect), and therefore inferior to some other poem? It is hard to figure out.

On the Limits of Poetry collects the essays of twenty years, presumably those which Tate believes to be most worth preserving. Among them there is no single essay on any of the very greatest poets—none on Shakespeare or Dante or Homer or Lucretius or Goethe or even Milton

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

(though there are many illuminating occasional remarks on all of these). For the most part their subjects are relatively minor poets, whether good or bad of their rank. This is, I think, surprising in the case of a critic and poet wholly devoted to poetry, who stands for and knows the best. I believe that the partial vacuum may be related to the theoretical gap which I have just mentioned.

Tate's aesthetics, or any like his, is most at ease with minor poets. It can do very well in pointing out the excellences of some of Emily Dickinson's poems (surely he overrates her), or the excellences and defects of Hardy's. But it will lead him to place Landor at the top of the nineteenth century. Landor has written well, better than is ordinarily noticed; and some of his poetry is perfect by Tate's definitions and criteria. None of Coleridge's is; and yet an aesthetic system which rates Landor over Coleridge must at least be questioned closely. But what of the very great?

Can it be that Tate is led to shy away from a full-dress criticism of, say, Homer or Shakespeare by an intuition that his closed aesthetics would be broken open by the impact? Tate is insisting on "the limits of poetry." His critical writing is a sharp correction to that muddling of art and "life" which has as its effect the degradation of style and the debasement of values. It remains nevertheless true that art is part of life, and that men, as creators and as audience, will persist in violating any defined limits placed around the part. It is wrong, we can agree, to read a poem as if it were a theological essay or a communist tract or a psychological treatise. But it is illusory to suppose that he who made the poem or we who read it are not beings with theological passions and social hopes and powerful convictions about the nature of our fellow-men, or that these can be held back from our knowledge and judgment of the poem. Without these, without "life," there would be no poem at all.

James Burnham

THE COLONIAL VS. THE NATIONAL

JOHN SINGLETON COPLEY. By James Thomas Flexner. Houghton Mifflin Company. $7.50.
WASHINGTON ALLSTON: A Study of the Romantic Artist in America. by Edgar Preston Richardson. The University of Chicago Press. $10.00.

The pictures of John Singleton Copley and Washington Allston offer an interesting comment on the dilemma that has always

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

faced the American artist. It is a dilemma we are accustomed to bringing to a focus in the novels of James, but the lines were not always as clearly marked as he draws them there. For Copley, the problem of the American artist had not yet been formulated in its most blighting terms, and this helped to make possible his distinguished achievement in painting. His answer to the problem involved no more than an original modification of the European stem by an essentially American, but delicately flexible and receptive sensibility. The tradition to which his work conformed necessarily remained European, but there was as yet no emotional urgency to superimpose a self-conscious national pattern on top of it, nor yet any nervous rebellion against doing so. Copley's paintings exhibit a free and natural air, and they are almost the last American paintings that do—at least until comparatively recent times. But Copley was born in 1738, and the kind of problem that confronted the Colonial was less invidious than the problem posed by the inhibiting nationalism that grew up after the American Revolution. Their paintings reveal a superficial similarity between Copley's and Allston's problems, but the similarity exists only in the poverty of cultural background which drove them both, perhaps too vehemently, to the study of ancient masterpieces when they finally became accessible to them. The psychological barrier between Europe and America, insofar as it exists for Copley at all, is an obstruction easily got over.

Copley went to England shortly before the Revolution broke out, and stayed there; and although his English pictures represent a change from the direct, rather cold vision of his American work, they usually (but not always) exhibit a quality that distinguishes them from the work of his European contemporaries. But this "difference" is not due to a New England local coloring of feeling, or a national narrowness of perception—which would certainly have been the case had Copley been born fifty years later; it is a "difference" which itself embodies a large part of Copley's rare distinction, and it may be glimpsed, for example, in his *Portrait of Midshipman Augustus Brine,* which hangs in the Metropolitan Museum. In this portrait, despite its great indebtedness to the English School, Copley reveals through the pinched, supercilious face of the little midshipman a quick apprehension of personality, a shrewd lightning grasp of the elusive, individual identity rather than of the impressive aristocratic type resemblances that predominate in Reynolds and Lawrence. The portrait is a strange anticipation of Eakins, and it is, one feels, something that only an American could have done. It represents the kind of crafty insight, the shrewd, calculating intuition, the sense of the hidden weakness which, vested not in an artist's eye, but in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a nation at large, would guarantee that nation's commercial prosperity. On the surface it is a thoroughly English picture, and yet it is thoroughly un-English at last. For Copley, there was not enough distance between Europe and America either to exclude or embarrass him as an artist—there was just enough to give him a detachment which he knew how to make the most of.

There is no doubt that *Brook Watson and the Shark* is Copley's masterpiece, and it is barely possible it is the greatest of all American paintings. Several years ago when the Museum of Modern Art showed it in its exhibition, "Romantic Painting in America," the tyranny it exercised over the imagination was so complete that one returned to it again and again at the expense of everything else in the show. It is therefore a little surprising to find Mr. Flexner writing, "Even that fierce rendition of terror, *Brook Watson and the Shark,* is fundamentally literal-minded. Far from frightening us with imaginative symbols, Copley makes us feel that we are actual spectators of the tragedy as it occurred." At one level this remark is true, but it too easily assumes that an image cannot be simultaneously literal and symbolic. Actually, the impact of this picture is due to its inexhaustible capacity to take interpretation. There is more than mere literalness (however brilliantly executed) in the mysterious suggestiveness of the open jaws of the shark, in the ghostly nakedness of the man floating through the green water, in the highly conventionalized, almost ritualistic gestures of the men in the boat, and in the enigmatic repose of the negro, whose extended arm, raised in a kind of benediction, carries into the foreground of the action the weight and solidity of the great vessels riding at anchor in the harbor. Not until Melville would an American artist produce anything of comparable imaginative power. The important thing to remark here is that although the directness of vision is insistently American it is realized with a maturity possible only as long as an American could function without nervousness in the presence of the European tradition. The figures at first seem wooden and awkward (this was Copley's first important London picture), but his understanding of what could be achieved in terms of that very defect (and perhaps only in those terms) makes the picture a wonderful success—and it is an understanding that Allston's contemporaries would have been incapable of.

Allston was born forty-one years after Copley, while the American Revolution was still in progress: consequently, he grew up in an environment from which the absence of good paintings to study was the least of the difficulties confronting the American artist. The problem was no longer the simple one of going to Europe to study or live: it had become

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the complex problem of "escaping" to Europe—and one had to deal also with the uneasy conscience that followed on the heels of that alternative. The ease with which Copley's art had managed to be both American and European without embarrassment, and to achieve real stature in terms of a culture not yet hopelessly fragmentary, gave place to the nervous high spirits of Washington Allston viewing the galleries of Europe for the first time, filching romantic fragments from a thousand ancient paintings with the voracious appetite of a starved American. Allston's pictures are not only charming—they are beautifully painted; and it is impossible to view them without sharing in the exhilaration with which he delightedly utilized parts of Titian, Raphael, Poussin, Prud'hon, Crome, Gainsborough, Bonnington, Michelangelo, Claude, Lorenzo Lotto, Hogarth, Rubens and probably dozens of others. But the pleasure at last becomes a little boring and one prefers to remember how Copley had complained from France on first viewing the works of Raphael, Corregio, Titian, and Guido, that he hoped the Paris pictures did not represent the best works of those artists from whom he had anticipated so much in America. And if one compares the feeling and knowledge with which Copley assimilated the influence of Raphael in *The Ascension* with the exuberant virtuosity with which Allston could paint in *anybody*'s manner the difference between, not so much two men as two societies, becomes apparent.

It is difficult not to think of Allston in terms of *Roderick Hudson*. James' novel is the most valid and deepest comment ever written on the dilemma confronting the contemporaries of Allston. The following dialogue between Roderick and his patron, Rowland Mallett, as they talk beneath "the long-stemmed pines of the Villa Ludovisi" mentions every significant element in Allston's own charm and failure as a painter: the eagerness of response, the quickness of assimilation with its superficial sophistication, the engaging innocence, and finally that sense of guilt, that moral nervousness which was to prove an incurable disease in American art:

"It came over me just now that it's exactly three months to a day since I left Northampton. I can't believe anything so ridiculous."

"It certainly seems more."

"It seems ten years. What an exquisite ass I was so short a time ago!"

"Do you feel," Rowland asked all amusedly, "so tremendously wise now?"

"Wise with the wisdom of the ages and the taste of a thousand fountains. Don't I look so? Surely I haven't the same face. Haven't I different eyes, a different skin, different legs and arms?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

" . . . you're in the literal sense of the word, more civilized. I dare say," added Rowland, "that Miss Garland would think so."

"That's not what she would call it; she would say I'm spoiled; I'm not sure she wouldn't say that I'm already hideously corrupted."

After Allston's return to America he produced a few pictures in which there is a small but personally felt vein of poetry that is new in his work. And yet Mr. Richardson's attempt to argue that Allston's homecoming was not an artistic calamity for him is not only unconvincing, but absurd when he argues that Allston finally failed, not because New England presented an unfavorable environment, but because the exact opposite was the case. "The world was too interested and friendly, too eager to encourage him. . . . " This represents a complete misunderstanding of the whole problem, which centers in the relationship of the American artist with the European tradition (as far as I know no one of any intelligence has ever questioned the decency and well-meaningness of Americans towards art), and one has to go back to the concluding pages of *Roderick Hudson* to understand what really happened, why Allston in New England turned more and more from painting to aesthetics and literature. It was not merely for the sake of ending his novel that James brought Roderick Hudson to disaster at the cliff's edge:

"Roderick's stricken state had driven him, in the mere motion of flight, higher and further than he knew; he had outstayed supposably the first menace of the storm and perhaps even found a dark distraction in watching it. Perhaps he had simply lost himself. The tempest had overtaken him, and when he tried to return it had been too late. He had attempted to descend the cliff in the treacherous gloom, he had made the inevitable slip, and whether he had fallen fifty or three hundred feet little mattered now. Even if it had not been far, it had been far enough."

Marius Bewley

THE GHETTO AND THE WORLD

PRINCE OF THE GHETTO. By Maurice Samuel. Alfred A. Knopf. $3.00.

In this book on Peretz, a companion volume to his *World of Sholom Aleichem*, Maurice Samuel continues the very good work of bringing an undeservedly dying literature to a possible resuscitation with the English reader, Gentile or (alas) Jew, who can have no other contact with it. The only thing I regret in the two books of translations of this

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

kind that he has published so far is that in neither did he develop any serious literary criticism. Translation is not enough to carry over "Classical Yiddish" into a foreign medium; without criticism, at least of the historical sort which can expand, for an uninformed audience, a given piece of work to the full meaning of its themes, Yiddish literature, even of its greatest period, may appear provincial and off-center, removed from the main interests of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Europe in which it was produced. And it is this impression which one is likely to receive from Samuel's book, for all his effort to assure the reader of the contemporaneity and importance of Peretz's intellectual concerns. He divides him in two—"The Prince of the Ghetto" is the author of the folk tales and stories of wonderful Chassidic rabbis and their disciples, of miracles of faith, hope and charity, joy in the Torah and in the emanation of God; Yitzchok Leibush Peretz is an editor, social worker and intellectual leader of the Jewish Warsaw of his time, a man of modern predilection, friendly to socialism and everything radical and worldly—and leaves the two halves disconnected, with the opinion that the "real" Peretz is of the ghetto. But there is a far more intimate connection between his two natures than Samuel lets on.

Of first importance to Peretz was the reconstitution of the Jews. They were, in his time, already committed to a secular and European perspective; their destiny was no longer to await fulfilment of the Divine Promise but was, like the fortune of any people taking the turn of the century into the Twentieth, something to be made. Peretz was thus something of a champion of pragmatism—an uncommon philosophy for the Jews, whose practical sense had always been hitched to a religion which gave it ample representation, but never allowed it an expression of its own, with the right to choose self-sufficient ends. Peretz would have freed the life-energy of the Jews from service to the religious ideal (*derleben*—that we may live to see the Promise fulfilled) and encouraged it to find direct, creative satisfaction in intrinsic goods. This meant a Jewish community closer than any had yet been to the surrounding nations, sharing the values of all Europe and contributing its part to the general belief in progress, and to such work as could make it real. Secular equivalents had to be found for what was deserted in the sacred tradition, to preserve the cohesion of the original culture. These came to hand, oddly enough, in the science of the time and the enthusiasm for learning, whose first effect on the lagging medieval groupings of the Jews had been so disruptive. But socialism provided one reigning influence as the worldly objective to which the new worldly enthusiasm was to be directed, and thus a goal for all the Jews; the other came from

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the new culture itself, which was regarded more as a renewal than a revolution. The Jews, who now had their own modern history to create, entered, under Peretz, their own Renaissance, of which he was the representative man.

But Peretz' statement of the radical-secular ideal was never simple; it was accompanied by a counter-thesis to preserve not merely the spirit of the sacred tradition but in some part the tradition itself. This was necessary as a means by which the Jews could adopt a secular perspective *as Jews.* But the tradition must also be brought into touch with the world, that it may continue to develop. "Dangerous to religion," he maintained, "is only he who would stop (its development) at any point along the way. . . . If my idea of God grows *in me,* keeping pace with my own growth, the language in which I speak with my God must change, as must also the symbolism in which my faith expresses itself." He who would stop the tradition from developing, murders it. But Peretz was particularly contemptuous of those who, in the name of renaissance and renewal, Spencer or statistics, would abandon the whole Jewish idea and have the Jews disappear among the nations without a trace. He was opposed both to crass and high-minded assimilation: to baptism for gain and to baptism even in the fire of the workingclass movement where liberation from their Jewishness was often among the values for which Jewish revolutionaries fought. (As early as 1906 in "Hope and Fear," a personal manifesto to the revolutionary movement, he warned the oppressed against becoming the new oppressors. "My heart is with you," he declared, while expressing the fear that a victorious socialism would become corrupted by bureaucracy, and that it would establish a dictatorship which would eradicate everything dissident, proud and creative in the human spirit.) His character was balanced between the sacred and the secular, radical and conservative; his expression as a poet and intellectual, between the religio-mythic and the sociological. It was in the image of his own complex, intricate harmony that he should have wished to see the new Jewish culture come forth.

There are a number of curiously German affinities here. In his flair for dialectic—his arguments were frequently laid out in this form, with the conclusion a synthesis of conflicting theses—Peretz, it is quite likely, reached over Marx, directly to Hegel: his interpretation of history was far from materialistic, and Jewish history in particular was for him a form of pure idea. And the idea of culture itself, which was his foremost preoccupation and which he made into the defining property of the Jews as a people, was such another: a pure idea, similar in mean-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing and genesis to the German. For the Germans *Kultur* had been the immediate and ultimate meaning of *Volk,* the characteristic activity and the fulfilment of spirit; it was a transcendental sublimation of nationalism, originally *echt demokratisch,* an achievement of the European idea as a whole and therefore internationalist, with, however, the significant qualification that the German idea take leadership; this survived as a rationalization when Germany's empire was no longer of the clouds. Culture-nationalism was particularly appealing to Jewish intellectuals—it served as a model synthesis of the inner group and the outer Europe; it encouraged the development of the old tradition into new and useful directions, and it made no direct appeal to power. It was in this spirit, as "good Jew" and "good European," that Peretz embraced the idea of cultural nationalism; and it is with this in mind, the scope of his interests and European commitments, that one must turn to the "Prince of the Ghetto" as author of the Chassidic tales and folk-stories.

The most obvious difference between Peretz and Sholom Aleichem in their use of the Yiddish language is that Peretz holds irony to a minimum (I mean the language itself and not the uses to which it may be put). In Sholom Aleichem's Yiddish the medium is so inflected that every expression, whatever its emotion, is necessarily also ironic; the quality of the medium attaches itself to everything that passes through it, and never could a literature bear more irony, for obviously the next step is silence. Peretz' language is clear; his Yiddish, even at its most poetic, is a means of communication. The author of the Chassidic wonder stories retains the habits of the intellectual leader, and the pragmatic stamp is on every word. The tone of wonder is given by the intelligence and not by the Chassidic awe it represents. He shares the faith of which he writes, but at a considerable remove, and it does not rest for him in the objects or efficacies of the Chassidic mystique, nor does it express a natural piety of utterance, as with prayer; his is a borrowed piety, taken from the intelligence, adept at translating one mode into another and generous with words: let the Chassidim speak for me. So far he is the artist, confident of the translation his art can make; but faith cannot be translated, it is not, like a meaning, common to men, but rather an intention which each man must have for himself, his own experience. Here the literary artist parts company with his artists of faith, the Chassidic wonder-workers. The Rabbis and their disciples enjoyed a unity of experience far greater than any modern literature, no matter how "Chassidic," can hope to comprehend; their joy of life and their faith, what they received and what they put out, were one.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It was a production of and a commerce with a single, almost pantheistic God of an immediate reality, on which they could practically lay their hands. Peretz could take their joy of life for his own, but his faith was not of the same order and had no connection with the object of their joy. His faith was, again, the pragmatist's, residing in usage—in particular in the uses to which the Chassidic joy of life, for him no longer a final thing, could be put. The Chassidism of the preceding century represented for Peretz a burst of creative activity and of the life-forces, to a similar liberation of which he would have liked to awaken the Jews of his own time.

Accordingly, he took the Chassidic ecstasies not as ultimate things, visions, in the midst of appearances, that disclose the noumenal world's unity in love, but rather as the immediate phenomena in a radiance of this world. The vision is strictly of appearances in actual historical time, but they are seen under a holy light. This light is familiar, though the direction from which Peretz catches it is strange, a surprise: it is the holy light of progress, enlightenment, brotherhood, the revelation of that face of the Godhead in which liberalism seeks its own image. Not that his Chassidic parables are meant as object-lessons in liberalism, for their dialectical character makes a simple reading impossible—even as Chassidic pieties, though there, of course, they mean what they say; Peretz' liberalism is of his whole career, of the poet as well as the community-worker, and for the poet its source is the power of love, drawn from the eros of Chassidism, and fulfilling for him the function of attracting the nations into brotherhood.

His concern with Chassidic themes was thus not something separate from the rest of Peretz' work, as Samuel states, but a synthesis of all his work, corresponding to the balancing principle of his own character. This principle was the joy and love of life, the encouragement of the natural creative forces which Peretz, anxious to prevent the disintegration of the Jews through assimilation or stagnant orthodoxy, identified, for reasons of cultural continuity, with Chassidism. Nor did he develop the Chassidic mode primarily for the sake of moral opportunity. He was not basically a moralist. Though all his tales have a moral, and he bitterly condemned, even vilified, the bourgeois spirit among the Jews, his first judgment was always prior to morality: it asked, "What kind of life is this, how much natural devotion, how much creative vigor is there in it?" Likewise his liberalism with its doctrine of love; this never degenerated into a piety, but remained a translation into "politics of the spirit" of the value he placed on the life energies as such. (At least, so I would go about to interpret the miraculous light

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that the Chassidic Rabbi, Noachke, elicits from the grass, the sky, and the very tatters of his disciples at the climax of the story, "Between Two Cliffs.") There is a political use in Peretz' refraction of this light of the *shekhina*. It invokes the creative powers, the *"shaffende koiches"* of the phrase familiar to the rhetoric of Yiddish culture, in the name of which we shall orient our life as Jews, as Reb Noachke did in his worship, so that the Divine Light shine down on our things of this world, which will answer with their own natural light. But here there is also an immediate celebration of the love of life itself, prior to the Divine; it is the joy in this world, the eros and agapé at one in nature.

That this light of nature has been extinguished in liberalism is no fault of the latter, though Peretz, like all the liberals of his time, who believed in progress, did not foresee that the power of love would yield before the love of power. Only power philosophers like Nietzsche were clear on this point. Peretz, "good Jew" and "good European," all his life identified the progressivism of the nineteenth century, which had its actual origins in doctrines of natural and social struggle, and was essentially a power philosophy in disguise, with the loving, communal spirit of the Chassidim. This was of course a serious mistake, but the blame lies more on generosity than myopia. For Peretz did make provision for self-defense, of a kind, against the enemy. (No Polish Jew could forget pogroms.) The defense of this liberalism with its many exposures was to lie in community. Under this new dispensation the Jews from all over Europe were to form a community within the community of nations in close and harmonious contact with one another; this influence was to radiate from Poland, which in turn had it from Peretz in the image of the balanced complexity of his own nature. It was as an example of life, to themselves and to the rest of the world, that they were to survive and grow; a life at the highest pitch of creative tension, all cohering—workers, socialists, scientists, actual Chassidim—with the power of the new Yiddish word that Peretz spoke. It was sheer generosity, such reliance on culture, and would have been recklessness, could one even have imagined the maniacal fury that was to break loose. But Hegel was reclaimed by the Germans. A community was exterminated, which otherwise would have survived as one of the highest secular cultures of all Europe.

Isaac Rosenfeld

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

VARIETY

GIDE'S HAMLET

When *Hamlet* opened in Paris after the war, I was asked by the French Radio to interview the translator, André Gide. At that time, November, 1946, I was studying at the Sorbonne, and finding everyone very kind to the handful of Americans left in Paris after the army's departure. The interview was arranged for me by Mademoiselle B., and on the second of November, at eleven o'clock in the morning, I appeared in André Gide's sixth floor apartment on the Rue Vaneau, eager to discuss with Gide the old problem of Hamlet, the true Northern hero, whose cousin and rival Siegfried was now deep in the doldrums.

André Gide greeted me in English, simply, warmly, in grandfather style. He recognized my uniform, and addressed me by my military title. We entered his study, in whose great window I saw the Eiffel Tower, the Dome of the Invalides, and the ash-dark line of the Bois de Boulogne under a dove-gray sky. Gide put a stick of wood on the dying fire, and asked me whether I had seen the play. I told him I had been to see it with several American friends, who had found a number of strands in the play unusual. He became all ears. They thought, I said, that the Horatio-theme had been given more prominence than it needed, and the evil men less villainy than the action intends. Gide smiled, and the eyes under the bushy eyebrows looked sharp and clear. "Do you think I am wrong in considering my translation of *Hamlet* the best in French?" he asked. I assured him that having read only one other translation, reputed superior, I found his so much more luminous and flexible that I thought it a masterpiece, *et d'une splendeur!* "How could it be otherwise?" I asked. "You are not a professor turning one counter into another; you are a writer recreatting language. Your *Hamlet* is not a mere translation: it is a re-thinking, a re-feeling, a re-nerving of the play." Upon this Gide, who had by now slipped into French, complained that the American edition of his translation had printed the French opposite the English line for line, giving the effect of a blank verse rendition. It was most unfortunate that the American reader should receive any such impression. His translation into French prose in no sense intended the effect suggested.

He left the room to fetch a copy of the American edition, which I had not yet seen. I noticed that his walls were lined with contemporary French books, and that in the next room his secretary was busily

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

engaged in typing from a manuscript. Gide asked her to find in the files a copy of a letter to Roger Martin du Gard, in which he discussed the wisdom of Barrault's opening the Martigny Theater as a new venture with a play as difficult as *Hamlet*. Gide felt that Kafka's *Trial,* in its play form, suited the times more closely.

As he returned to the room, bearing the letter and the copy of *Hamlet,* I thought how like Yeats was this old man before me, outliving the tragic generation of Wilde and of Proust, renewing himself constantly and revealing a mind more efficient and far-ranging than that of a business executive or a scientist in the atomic age. His business was literature; his theme of research was not the medieval one of Proust, of what happens to people, but the modern one of Kant and Nietzsche, of what people do. The energy in his baritone voice, in his walk was the energy of a man who returns from each bout with outward circumstance convinced that the bout itself was the meaning, not the pleasure and not the pain. He looked eternal, like someone for whom love and death and truth and beauty are casual shapes one recognizes on the way but does not allow to break the heart or unsettle the mind. Here certainly was the new writer of a naturalist age, master of the *gai savoir.*

"Do you mind," he asked, "if we continue in French? I have a certain *pudeur* about speaking in your tongue. But I see that you know the play well, and I should like you to comment on some of my versions."

He opened the book, placed the black tortoise-shell glasses on his nose, and looked formidably at the text.

"What do you make of Laertes' words to Ophelia: *And keep you in the rear of your affection. . . ?* This is a military image. I could not render it otherwise than: '. . . *ne t'aventure pas au bord de ton amour.*' "

"Since the English tells Ophelia not to advance so far as her affection would take her, I think the sense has been well rendered. I do not see how the violence of Laertes' image, mixing love and musketry, can pass without violence into the French."

"Then," he said, "there's the curious idea in Hamlet's 'Thus bad begins and worse remains behind,' about which I have appended a note in my translation. I translate it as '*Mauvais début; la suite sera pire.*' What would you say does it mean?"

"I have always taken this line to follow the thought of the preceding one:

I must be cruel only to be kind: *Thus bad begins and worse remains behind.* I should think the 'bad' means that Hamlet has become an instrument of evil in the service of good, while the 'worse' refers to the agents of evil in the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

service of evil who manipulate the strings of his destiny. I notice that you separate the two lines, reading them:

'S'il m'a fallu être cruel, c'est par tendresse. Mauvais début: la suite sera pire! Of course, your version is dramatically just; you take 'behind' to mean 'in reserve'."

Gide seemed pleased, and turned the pages of the book, coming upon the words:

. . . is't not perfect conscience To quit him with this arm?

"How do you like my rendering the word 'arm,' not in the sense of hand, but in the sense of weapon or trick. All translators of Shakespeare, even Schlegel, stick to the literal 'this arm.' *'Je me ferais scrupule de retourner contre lui ses propres armes?'*"

I agreed that turning the king's own methods upon him might be in keeping with Hamlet's new mood after his return from the sea voyage, but that for me 'this arm' would be truer to the tenderness of Hamlet, his scrupulousness, and the fact that he has never stooped to using the king's methods, like spying and so forth. "The Hamlet who would say, 'I shall pay him in his own terms' would be a character out of the Resistance," I ventured, "and no less noble, of course, for his realism."

Gide had rendered the word 'nunnery' by 'couvent.' He told me that he had suspected the Elizabethan slang meaning of the term from the text, but that he could find no one

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to confirm it. I suggested J. Dover Wilson.

We were smoking Pall Mall cigarettes, of which I offered him a package. Cigarettes, with the Americans gone, were then very difficult to come by. But when I returned to see him the second time, there were three different brands of American cigarettes spread out on his writing desk, and he asked me to choose among them. This was in the middle of November, and this time we were to complete the interview that the first two hours had not permitted. Gide had returned a day or two before from a trip to Brussels, where he had seen an English company do *Hamlet* in a one-night stand. The performance had delighted him, and it was with the playing of that company in mind that he considered the answers to the questions that I had proposed during our first interview. He had then declined to answer them because he felt that they required very careful thought. Of my original nine questions he had decided to answer only four. The five questions rejected were: 1) Hamlet in Gide's novels, 2) *Hamlet* and Montaigne's *Apologie de Raymond Sébond*, 3) Hamlet and Alceste of *The Misanthrope*, 4) Hamlet's secret ("the heart of my mystery") and psychoanalysis, 5) Hamlet and T. S. Eliot's statement that Hamlet's emotion is in excess of the facts. I was somewhat disappointed that he had chosen the old chestnuts among my questions, the schoolroom glories, but it pleased me that he had carefully written out the answers in his absolute French. He wished to see my translation when I had made one, he told me. I then posed my first question in his order, which was:

"What specific feature or quality of the play *Hamlet* did you emphasize in your translation of the work?"

"There are numerous French translations of Hamlet, and they have all proved very useful to me in my work. They indicate a great care for precision. That I persisted in working on my translation, and, upon the earnest entreaty of Jean-Louis Barrault, brought it to completion, I ascribe to the fact that I have always felt something lacking in the earlier translations, something that I considered indispensable: the poetic as well as the musical essence that animates the play throughout; a kind of lyrical transposition of key, vibrating in a surcharged atmosphere that bathes the characters and colors their speeches. It seemed to me that my work would be in vain if I conveyed into the French no more than the meaning of these speeches, which a number of the earlier translators had rendered quite well, but at the cost of the rhythm, the rapture, and the peculiar latent music in which Shakespeare's genius sports. That is what I proposed to render, and without sacrificing the precise meaning of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the words. For, as I have explained in a brief preface to my translation: 'There is nothing simpler than abandoning precision for lyric flights and losing one's footing. But the real problem was to lose nothing, neither footing nor wings, neither rhyme (nor rhythm) nor reason, neither logic nor poetry.' But that spelled a difficulty that often seemed insurmountable. It is that difficulty that was primarily responsible for my abandoning the project after the translation of the first act. That one act had given me more trouble, cost me more in effort, than the five acts of *Anthony and Cleopatra*. That first act appeared on the book stalls more than twenty years ago. It was the friendly insistence of Jean-Louis Barrault, during a providential encounter in Marseilles in 1942, that again set me to work, and for this I am gratefully in debt to Jean-Louis Barrault. I worked at his behest, with the prospect of reward in seeing him interpret in my translation the most exacting of roles. Now in Paris he has been having a triumphant success in it."

"Is *Hamlet* your favorite among the Shakespearian tragedies?"

"After a lecture delivered in Cairo, I was approached by a number of students who asked me for the title of my favorite Shakespearian play. I replied without hesitation: the one that I have last reread. Few months go by without my taking up one or another of the plays, and always with a fresh ac-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cess of wonder. I can say with certainty that Racine surpassed himself in *Phèdre,* and I can put this tragedy at the summit of his achievement—for each of his tragedies moves, more or less successfully, towards the same ideal perfection. It is otherwise with Shakespeare: not only in subject matter does each one of his plays differ from the others, but also in manner, in insight, in language. Were it not for a certain incomparable master-craft that in equal degree animates each play, one might be led to believe that they were produced by different hands. But not a single one of Shakespeare's contemporaries attained to this nobility, to this profound sense of order, to this plenitude, to this splendor, to this powerful radiance. If therefore each one of his masterpieces seems to us wonderful in itself, it is all the more wonderful that a single mind was capable of such a variety of masterpieces. I would not know how to choose my favorite among them, as I have said, and, truly, *Hamlet* is far from being the most perfect of the plays."

"What is there in *Hamlet* that, across the centuries, holds us spellbound?"

"*Hamlet* is doubtless the one work that most astonishes, that troubles most, the one that lends itself to the greatest variety of interpretations, and the one that catches up with us, across the years, in most secret fashion (I almost said: in a most indiscreet fashion): no, indeed, it is not the most perfect work. Let me add that with a like subject perfection is inadmissible. The conciseness, the clarity of design of *Othello,* of *Macbeth,* of *Julius Caesar,* or of *Coriolanus* would never suit *Hamlet,* whose temper involves a certain twilight, a certain imprecision of outline, an unbroken possibility of elusiveness in all directions. What is most astonishing is that this play, so esoteric in quality, so opulent in its trappings, so subtle and ornate in expression that it would seem to speak to the most cultivated minds only, should, in counterpoint to the philosophizing, admit of an action that is so startling and so adroitly handled that it compels the interest and holds in suspense the attention of the most diversified public. It is for *Hamlet* that the public declares, we are told, in preference to any other play. It is *Hamlet* that Fielding's Partridge sees on the boards in London; it is *Hamlet* that comes up in the novels of Dickens. It is *Hamlet* that first enters into the literature of the most diverse nations."

"At school we talk for hours about why Hamlet delays killing the King. Why does he?"

"Curious question! Had Hamlet killed the King, there would have been no play. The very subject of this play, the secret of the character of Hamlet, is that he thinks before acting.

And thus the native hue of
resolution

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought . . .

And it is in this that he differs from all the other Shakespearian heroes, all of whom are, more or less, impulsive men. Is it with Hamlet only a question of temperament? Is there not to be seen in his irresolutions, in the 'to be or not to be,' the effect of his long sojourn as student in Wittenberg? I have often wondered about this and have already written of it. What part did the teaching he heard in Germany play? Who were the teachers of those days that, before Kant and Schopenhauer, invited the students to metaphysical speculations, and perhaps put in doubt the reality of the external world? What doctrines were taught in those days in German universities that encouraged in Hamlet this predisposition to inaction? Doubtless I am not the first to pose this question; I should like to know whether it has been answered."

I did not know whether the question had ever been posed or answered. I said that very likely Belleforest and Montaigne had more to do with *Hamlet* than any German influences. But that day, at any rate, Montaigne told Gide nothing about *Hamlet*. I phrased my final question:

"You speak of predisposition to inaction? Yet Hamlet does act. At

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

times he goes even too far, as when he murders Polonius. . . . "

" . . . . Thinking he is killing the King. . . . Yes, indeed, he does act, but in a quasi-spasmodic manner. And I believe that even from a clinical, a medical point of view, the condition of semi-aboulia, or partial loss of will-power, is admirably indicated. As soon as he has left his ruminations behind, he goes berserk. He is so badly adjusted to reality that each one of his decisive acts is preceded by a kind of trial act, a flash-in-the-pan. And nothing appears more baffling, more daring, more skillful than this time-lag, this lagging and listing that continues from scene to scene, from one end of the play to the other. And it is already present at the very beginning, in the conversation with the ghost; then in no matter what business in which Hamlet engages, with his mother, with the King, with Ophelia. . . . He first rough-hews the act. . . . Doubtless there have been Hamlets in all ages; and therefore he appears to us as the most modern of Shakespearian heroes. But now I would only be repeating what has already been said, many a time."

When a few days later I called for Gide's approval of my translation, his secretary gave me the neatly-typed envelope containing the French and English versions. Gide had a cold that day and stayed in his room, but when he heard my voice saying goodbye at the door, he entered in his bedroom slippers. He looked like a grandfather, but, with that admirable head, not just anybody's grandfather, but one conceived by the mind of Virgil or Henry James.

"Don't go before I tell you this little story," he said. "Once I bade an American goodbye, hoping to see him again. The American never returned. Meeting him in the street one day, I asked him why. 'Oh,' said he, 'goodbye is goodbye.' 'But,' I said, 'you have no word in English for *au revoir*.' 'Yes,' said the American, 'we say So long'." So Gide shook my hand, and said: "So long!"

Philip Roddman

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CORRESPONDENCE

LIBERALISM AND CONFUSION

Sirs:

The counter-attack against what is called the liberal-progressive tradition has been under way for several years now, and on some grounds we do not regret that this is true. We have ourselves, severally, given time and thought to the negative limitations as well as to the positive wrongnesses of our inherited democratic liberalism; and we of course welcome the contributions of other writers to the task of reassessing it. We find ourselves, however, genuinely confused by the form taken by some of the attacks upon it, and should like to suggest that there are two questions that can fairly be asked of anti-liberal and anti-progressive writers. (1) What is the exact and responsible semantic content of the words "liberal" and "progressive" when used, as they increasingly are, in a pejorative context? The impression grows on us that these words are rapidly losing such a content, and are becoming dangerously loose and emotive "signs" for intellectual inanity and political immaturity of any sort whatever. We have frankly failed to recognize, in many allusions to liberalism, any precise correspondence to the thought we ourselves find in the writings of a long series of liberals in the past, especially English and American.

(2) When the terms have been fairly defined, from what similarly well-defined point of view are anti-liberal and anti-progressive writers speaking? We do not suggest that only those who have attached themselves to another dogma or orthodoxy have an intellectual right to criticize liberalism: we recognize that a pessimistic skepticism, for example, is a traditional and honorable *Anschauung*. We submit only that we have in all cases a right to know whether it is this position or some other from which the vices of liberalism are being belabored; otherwise we are bound to have the impression that liberalism is being used simply as a scapebeast for the sins of the intellectual tribe.

To take a recent example of the tendency we are questioning—Mr. Richard Chase, in his essay, "Dissent on Billy Budd" (PR, November1948), remarks: "Strangely, Claggart [the master-at-arms who destroys Billy] is another version of Melville's self-righteous Liberal, the Confidence Man." Now, granting that the Confidence Man is himself intended to represent the liberal (and it is a gross oversimplification of Melville's intention to say so), we wonder what it is, closely, precisely, and tangibly, in the text itself of *Billy Budd* that justifies this curious description. We should have thought that Melville intended Claggart as an embodiment of what he himself calls (in Biblical phrase) the "mysteries of iniquity" or, more exactly, of "Natural [as distinguished from Total] Depravity." This, too, is a necessarily oversimplified interpretation; but even if it represents only part of a complex truth, we continue to wonder at what point the association with liberalism invades the conception of Claggart. Are we to gather that liberalism has become interchangeable with Natural Depravity? Was Iago a "progressive"? Did Count Cenci take a "liberal" line?

Still more recently, in his review of three works on Hawthorne ("The Progressive Hawthorne," PR, January 1949), Mr. Chase observes: "The most common cliché about Hawthorne is that he thought solitude a crime and believed in the brotherhood of man and in man's 'dependence on society.' This is good liberal doctrine." Now it is of course a familiar though not very cogent resource in controversy to dispose

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of an unsympathetic view by parodying it out of respectable existence, and we doubt whether anyone worth arguing with has ever indulged in so crudely simple and sentimental an interpretation. But in any case, is what Mr. Chase describes as "man's 'dependence on society'" merely good liberal doctrine in some fatuous sense? We should have said that, less tendentiously phrased, some such doctrine has many other associations—associations, for example, with the Platonic conception of man's dependence on civic unity and a rightly ordered State, with the Pauline doctrine that "we are members one of another," or (to get as far from liberalism as may be) with the insight that Father Zossima expresses in *Karamazov*: "All this terrible individualism must inevitably have an end, and all will suddenly understand how unnaturally they are separated from one another." Indeed, has not "good liberal doctrine" been open to the charge rather of social atomism than of an excessive emphasis on sociality?

It is surely a major intellectual task of our period to re-examine, to criticize, and to revise the assumptions, philosophical and other, of the democratic liberalism that is our inheritance from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. We doubt whether, in the end, it will or should continue to prevail in the form in which we have received it. Whether it should be summarily and unreservedly repudiated is another question, and one which intellectuals cannot hurriedly or lightmindedly undertake to answer. Too much, from every point of view, depends on the character of the result: it is not by any means a question of purely literary or literary-critical importance. Meanwhile the process of arriving at a responsible and genuinely critical answer will hardly be assisted by extreme semantic laxity and the combustion of straw men.

Newton Arvin
Robert Gorham Davis
Daniel Aaron
Northampton, Massachusetts

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

REPLY

Sirs:

Messrs. Arvin, Davis, and Aaron have raised several important questions. As for their specific reservations about my writings, I cannot, in the space allotted me, defend my reading of Melville, or my use of words like "liberal"; I refer interested persons to the texts at issue.

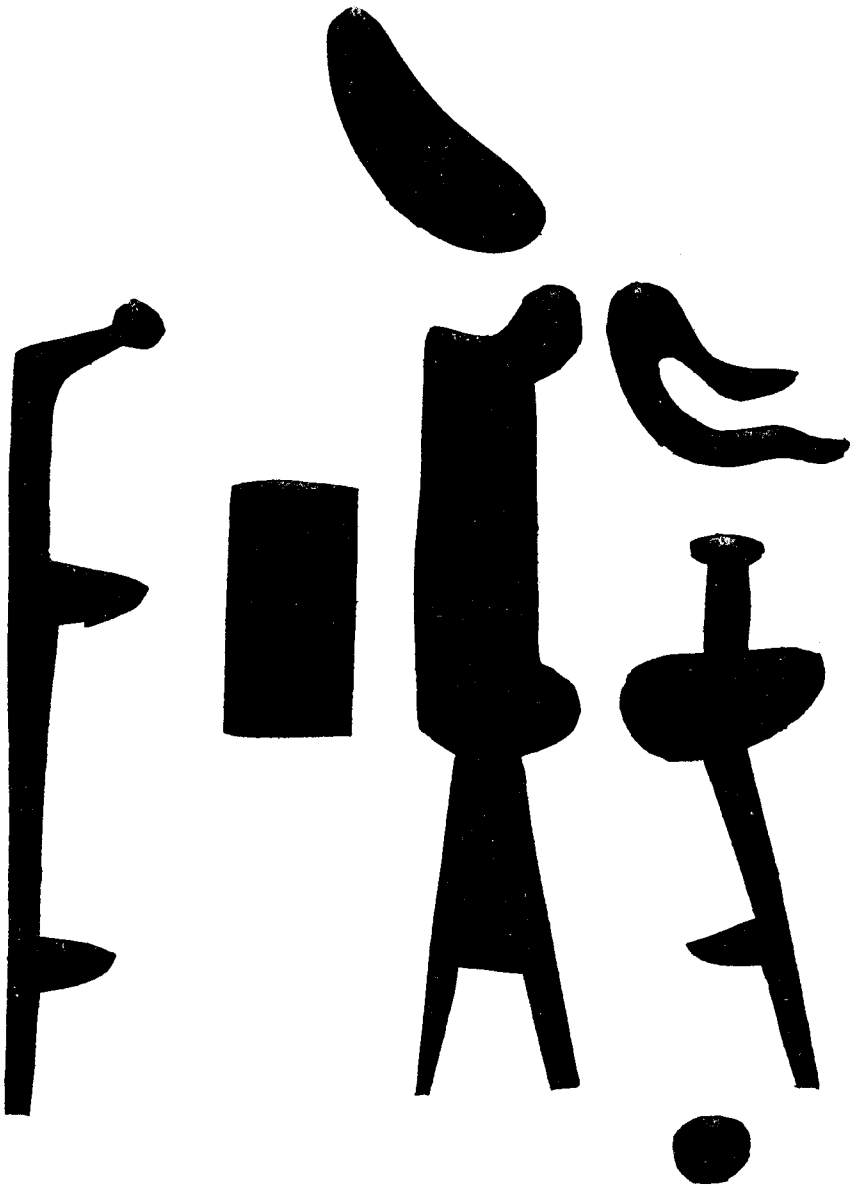
In speaking of man's "dependence on society" (not my phrase) I was attacking a pious cliché. The true idea that "we are members one of another" need not be defended from me. I perceive, however, that it must be defended from the gentlemen at Smith College, since in common with many modern liberals they believe that all men are members one of another, except liberals. *Thus they regard the question "Was Iago a 'progressive'?" as ludicrous, which whatever the answer, it is not. If it is silly to mention Iago in the same breath with "progressive" or "liberal," it is equally silly to connect these words with Othello, Hamlet, Anna Karenina, Don Quixote, Job, and Ahab—in short, with any of the great images of man and his career on earth. If it is silly to do this and if, in discussing the words of Father Zossima, we are "as far from liberalism as may be," then so much the worse for "liberalism." I do not know where, in the above letter, the laudable desire for clarity ceases and the concern to keep liberalism aloof, pure, and mindless (like the white whale) begins.*

If, as I hope, our skeptical, secular liberalism is to survive, it must be a comprehensive, sharp, and open view of life, not simply an acceptable stance vis-à-vis certain limited moral and potential issues. Perhaps Messrs. Arvin, Davis, and Aaron agree with this in principle. Let's hope, however, that the Confidence Man of the 1940's *has not turned out to be the Liberal Who Has Officially Reassessed Liberalism And Found It Good.*

Richard Chase

New London, Connecticut

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED